

ROPE ENOUGH
A PLAY IN THREE ACTS
BY CONAL O'RIORDAN

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ROPE ENOUGH

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A PLAY IN THREE ACTS
BY CONAL O'RIORDAN
(NORREYS CONNELL)

“The Authority of Death which is the Devil”

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1914

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TO
LEO AND JOSINE SIMONS-MEES
IN MEMORY OF NINETEEN YEARS
UNBROKEN FRIENDSHIP AND UNWEARYING GOODNESS

PERSONS IN THE PLAY

THE MARQUESS OF PADSTOW, O.M. (formerly a person of importance).

VISCOUNT WADEBRIDGE, M.P. (Home Secretary in the Conservative Reform Government : his elder son).

THE RIGHT REVEREND LORD AUSTIN STRAIGHT (Lord Bishop of the Church of England in Hippo : his younger son).

THE LORD FISHERTON DE MERE (his nephew).

SIR ADOLPHUS SWETE (a Judge of the High Court : Fisherton's brother-in-law).

THE VICAR OF FISHERTON.

MR. FIDLER, J.P. (ex-M.P. for the Fisherton Division).

COLONEL WEEDON-GOWER, V.C., C.B. (late of the Wessex Fusiliers).

LADY FISHERTON.

MAY FISHERTON (her daughter).

LADY SWETE (her younger sister).

EMILY (widow of Captain Lovely of the Wessex Fusiliers).

SIMS (Butler at Fisherton Abbey).

The Scene is laid at Fisherton Abbey in the present year, early autumn. The First Act in the grounds ; the Second in the library on the following morning ; the Third in the grounds, half an hour later.

ACT I

In the grounds of Fisherton Abbey, an hundred miles inland from London, sit talking between tea and dinner time of a sunny October day five men, all over forty and none much more than fifty. They are LORD FISHERTON DE MERE, an oldish, middle-aged peer of what might be called the "Backwoods" type, easy-going, but intelligent enough in a quiet, matter-of-fact way—the host; and on either side of him sit in a scattered group the VICAR OF FISHERTON, a kindly Erastian; COLONEL WEEDON-GOWER, V.C., a somewhat conventional soldier of the last school but one, well set up and presentable, whose rigid lines form a sufficient contrast with the curves of his newly acquired friend, MR. FIDLER, J.P., and ex-M.P., a man of weight in the county, who believes himself to embody the essential spirit of John Bull, and actually possesses the worst spirit of Squire Western very much diluted. Lastly, there is SIR ADOLPHUS SWETE, an urbane and debonair Judge of the High Court, jobbed into office but doing his best.

THE VICAR (*answering some observation of MR. FIDLER'S*). Yes, yes, we live in times of change, of

social unrest, but I still think (*almost apologetically*), I really do think that this life has its consolations.

SIR ADOLPHUS (*dreamily*). Quite so.

THE COLONEL (*reinforcing MR. FIDLER*). Emphatically, I say no. I say the state of affairs in England is deplorable since the starting of the Army Council.

THE VICAR (*as one expecting some horrible revelation*). What have they done?

COLONEL. What haven't they done? Take this new monstrosity—The Royal Flymen.

FISHERTON. The Royal Flying Corps? What's the matter with them?

COLONEL. Why, they're mostly sappers—married, Methodist, or mad.

FISHERTON. O, I know a very decent little chap in the R.F.C. Quite a kid—Tom Smith.

COLONEL. Not the sort of name my old colonel would have liked.

FISHERTON. He was flying from Salisbury north and came a cropper in the Long Meadow. He quite won my wife's heart.

COLONEL. We'd never have had this nonsense if we hadn't lost the Duke. . . .

SIR ADOLPHUS (*dreamily*). Undoubtedly a great man, a very great man, admirable in everything, except perhaps his statue.

Enter SIMS with papers.

FISHERTON. Take the *Globe*, Colonel, and cheer up.

Throws it to him and offers a choice to SIR ADOLPHUS.

SIR ADOLPHUS (*gently waving them aside*). Thank

you ; I read nothing now but a little Coventry Patmore in the Long Vacation.

THE VICAR. Ah, "The Angel in the House"! What a dream of domestic bliss!

SIR ADOLPHUS (*dreamily*). Quite so.

FISHERTON. Which do you read, Vicar?

THE VICAR. The *Pall Mall* has a bright and cheerful tone. . . .

FISHERTON (*handing him the "Pall Mall"*). Never knew you were a Die Hard.

THE VICAR (*not catching his point*). A Die Hard!— I . . . ?

MR. FIDLER (*proudly*). You're thinking of me. . . . I was a Die Hard.

SIR ADOLPHUS (*as one waking*). And, pray, what is a Die Hard?

MR. FIDLER (*glad to have roused interest in himself*). I was. . . . I would be now if I hadn't lost my seat.

COLONEL. That's the way in politics. All the good men lose their seats.

FISHERTON. Or their heads.

MR. FIDLER. I was done by a gross libel. Flop issued a leaflet . . .

SIR ADOLPHUS. What is Flop?

MR. FIDLER. The Labour candidate. My opponent. . . . He said in his libel he'd be sorry for me if I did die.

THE VICAR. Dear me, now ; is that a libel?

COLONEL. He ought to be shot.

MR. FIDLER (*generously*). I'm not vindictive. I only want reasonable damages.

SIR ADOLPHUS. Supposing that it influenced the

Nonconformist vote, an action might lie . . . my brother Doncaster has ruled . . .

MR. FIDLER. Pennefeather, K.C., says it'd be safe to ask for five thousand if Doncaster tried it. He's a pretty good judge—Doncaster—eh?

SIR ADOLPHUS. The best judge in England, I should say—of a point-to-point race.

MR. FIDLER (*slapping his leg*). That's the man for me.

COLONEL. But you'll horsewhip Flop?

MR. FIDLER. That might prejudice my suit.

SIR ADOLPHUS. I am aware of no process of law which enables you to eat your cake and keep it.

COLONEL (*huffily*). Then the less said about law the better.

SIR ADOLPHUS (*urbanely*). Quite so. . . . (*To MR. FIDLER.*) And when did you lose your seat?

MR. FIDLER. At the General Election last month.

SIR ADOLPHUS (*with polite surprise*). Last month! Ah, I was at Dieppe. . . . And there was a change of Government?

MR. FIDLER. I should think so! . . . Didn't you really know that Gardiner Church is in with what they call a Tory Reform Government?

SIR ADOLPHUS. I've never met this Mr. Church, but my old leader Watkins asked me if I was coming to his levée, so I assumed that something must have happened. It won't make any difference anyhow.

THE VICAR (*paper in hand*). I see that Lord Wadebridge goes to the Home Office.

FISHERTON. He's been at work a couple of days already.

COLONEL. Well, of course, I'm not a politician. I don't understand politics. (*With proud humility.*) I think no soldier ought to understand politics. But I do most positively say, and, mark my words, what I say will come true: this Government won't last six months.

MR. FIDLER (*gravely*). O, I dunno, I dunno. . . . With a paper majority anyhow of sixty-five, fresh from the polls and the old Radical seats gone half Socialist . . .

SIR ADOLPHUS. What is a Socialist?

MR. FIDLER. O, every dam rascal. There'll be a hundred of 'em in the new House.

SIR ADOLPHUS. Only a hundred rascals in the new House? How times have changed to be sure.

COLONEL. I don't understand figures. I understand human nature. And I say no Government could last that had Wadebridge in the Cabinet.

FISHERTON. What's the matter with Cousin Wadey?

COLONEL. My dear Fisherton, you know as well as I do that the country won't stand your cousin Wadey at any price.

FISHERTON. Why not?

COLONEL. Why not? Why, take his continental ideas. . . .

FISHERTON. Continental ideas! Why, every fool knows Wadey's as strait-laced as a Methodist preacher.

SIR ADOLPHUS. I distinctly recall having heard Lady Swete say so. And for a woman, she is a good judge of men.

FISHERTON. Yes, and she knows Wadey better than anyone, except perhaps Agatha.

SIR ADOLPHUS. Of course, and she is thoroughly acquainted with continental ideas.

COLONEL. O, by continental ideas I don't mean what you fellows mean.

SIR ADOLPHUS (*almost severely*). Then, my dear sir, why do you use the term "continental ideas"?

COLONEL (*sourly*). What I mean is that Wadebridge is notoriously no better than a common humanitarian.

MR. FIDLER (*pulling a long face*). O. . . . And they say he's a good debater.

SIR ADOLPHUS. I know so little of these things. . . . Does that preclude his being a humanitarian?

COLONEL. It makes him all the more dangerous.

THE VICAR. Surely it is not necessarily wrong to be even a humanitarian.

COLONEL. Maybe not, if you keep it to yourself and don't make it an excuse to injure your neighbours.

THE VICAR. Of course an injury done to one's neighbours . . .

MR. FIDLER. There can be no excuse for a thing like that.

COLONEL. Well—didn't Wadebridge vote for the abolition of the Royal greyhounds?

MR. FIDLER (*thoroughly roused*). He did, he did. Begad, I'd forgotten! It must be five years ago.

COLONEL (*proudly*). You see, though I'm not a politician . . .

THE VICAR. Still, Colonel, I must really object

that in the Apostolic sense hounds are not our neighbours any more than hares.

MR. FIDLER. I'm surprised to hear you say that, Vicar.

SIR ADOLPHUS (*with great gravity*). You forget the dog in the manger.

MR. FIDLER (*emphatically*). That's what I was thinking of.

COLONEL. Never mind that. I'm not thinking of the wrong done to the hounds. I'm thinking of the working men.

MR. FIDLER (*surprised*). The deuce you are!

COLONEL. Yes. Above all, of the working sportsman.

MR. FIDLER. O, . . . hear, hear!

COLONEL. Wadebridge's vote threw thirteen honest men out of employment.

MR. FIDLER. Shocking, don't you think, Sir Adolphus?

SIR ADOLPHUS. I had no idea there were so many in the country.

THE VICAR. Lord Wadebridge cannot have realised that side of the question.

COLONEL. And this is the man Gardiner Church has made Home Secretary!

MR. FIDLER. Why the country might be overrun with hares to-morrow.

SIR ADOLPHUS (*humbly*). I know so little of zoology.

FISHERTON (*sticking up for his relation*). Well, you see, Wadey won Mid-Lancashire for Tariff Reform.

MR. FIDLER. I doubt if he's a genuine Tariff Reformer—not Tariff Reform for Tariff Reform's sake.

FISHERTON. He's the only man that can argue it equally well in the House and out.

MR. FIDLER. Hang it all, Tariff Reform's above argument—it's patriotism.

FISHERTON. That's Wadey's argument—that it will be good for the country even if it costs something.

MR. FIDLER. Eh! . . . But the Central Office swears that it won't cost me a penny.

SIR ADOLPHUS. I'm shamefully ignorant. . . What exactly is Tariff Reform?

MR. FIDLER (*huffily*). O, don't ask me—I'm sick of it.

FISHERTON. Well, anyhow, Gardiner Church had to have Wadey on the Front Bench.

COLONEL. Why didn't they give him something that didn't matter—Education—or the Navy?

FISHERTON. Wadey would start by scrapping the submarines as dangerous nonsense.

COLONEL. He'd be right for once. Here is the Army wasting away for want of men and money while the Admiralty pitches them into the sea. I'd like to see Wadey as First Lord of the Admiralty.

SIR ADOLPHUS. I suggest to you that it might be a fleeting vision.

THE VICAR (*politely*). Ha! ha! I wish I could remember that: Lord Wadey, First Lord of the Admiralty, a fleeting vision.

SIR ADOLPHUS (*dragging his chair towards the VICAR*). Lady Swete tells me I must hear you preach.

THE VICAR (*pleased*). O, really—I never knew I had the honour of Lady Swete . . .

SIR ADOLPHUS. No, no, perhaps not—but her sister Agnes, Lady Fisherton, you know, she does attend your church, doesn't she?

THE VICAR. Well, of course, there's her pew. . . .

SIR ADOLPHUS. Quite so; that's what was in my mind. O, your sermons don't fall on deaf ears, I assure you.

THE VICAR. I am overjoyed to hear that.

SIR ADOLPHUS. Since I've been on the Bench I've dropped politics, but I continue to be interested in religion, and Lady Swete makes a point of telling me all that she hears from Lady Fisherton about your work.

THE VICAR. There is so little to say.

SIR ADOLPHUS. But you say it—my dear Sir. Fifty-two speeches a year of an hour or so each, and no notes of evidence to go upon. I call it marvellous.

COLONEL. It will be marvellous if Wadebridge remains any time at the Home Office.

SIR ADOLPHUS. Why, it's a very nice office for anyone that doesn't object to the smell of tobacco.

FISHERTON. He'll remain there as long as Gardiner Church remains at Downing Street.

COLONEL. Well, of course, I don't understand politics, but . . .

FISHERTON. It's not a mere question of politics.

COLONEL. What then?

FISHERTON. No one wants to be Home Secretary except for the screw.

SIR ADOLPHUS (*approvingly*). Neatly expressed—very.

MR. FIDLER. I never thought of Wadebridge wanting the screw.

FISHERTON. He doesn't want it, and he doesn't take it.

THE VICAR. What becomes of the money?

SIR ADOLPHUS (*instinctively*). I'm afraid I can't let you put that question.

COLONEL. Humph! Party funds, I should think. (*nobly*) I call it bribery.

SIR ADOLPHUS (*airily*). Call it anything you like—but do not call it bribery.

COLONEL. O, I'm the last man in the world to be afraid to tell the truth about man or woman.

SIR ADOLPHUS. Even the last man in the world may have to exercise a certain discretion in dealing with the last woman.

COLONEL. In my opinion subterfuge of any kind is dishonourable.

MR. FIDLER. Hear, hear! I hope that no one is going to disagree with that.

SIR ADOLPHUS. Ah, Mr. Fidler, you're a fine fellow, and I'm sorry for you.

MR. FIDLER. Why so?

SIR ADOLPHUS. I foresee that you are going to tell the truth and lose your libel action.

MR. FIDLER. What I say in the witness-box is Pennefeather's business, not mine.

COLONEL (*viciously*). What else is a lawyer paid for?

SIR ADOLPHUS (*with a bitterness under his laughing tone*). Why is a lawyer paid? Why, to corrupt him.

FISHERTON. After all, everything's corruption, more or less.

THE VICAR. Unfortunately that is only too true; but we must try not to think of it in that light.

SIR ADOLPHUS. That is the true judicial spirit.

MR. FIDLER. Didn't I hear somewhere that Wade-bridge is going to be married?

FISHERTON. He is—or says he is.

COLONEL. Cautious man. Did you hear whom he was going to marry?

FISHERTON. A Mrs. Lovely, the widow of some chap killed in the war.

COLONEL. That's right. He was in my old regiment. I was with him when he was killed at Boom-bosch.

THE VICAR. What a small world!

COLONEL. He was standing as near me as you are now. Providentially I was lying down, and escaped.

MR. FIDLER. If you hadn't, these scoundrels would have knocked you over like a pheasant.

THE VICAR. Was that when you won the Victoria Cross with so many other splendid fellows? . . . "Gentlemen" I think Lord Roberts called them.

SIR ADOLPHUS (*softly smiling*). Such a nice man!

THE VICAR. After all, war brings forth our noblest ideals.

MR. FIDLER (*husky with emotion*). "Greater than all things two things are: The one thing is woman and the other thing is war." Whose poetry is that?

SIR ADOLPHUS. Is that poetry?

FISHERTON. It sounds like the *Pink 'Un*.

MR. FIDLER. O, no, it's in a book my boy Tom's scoutmaster gave him.

FISHERTON. The deuce he did !

SIR ADOLPHUS (*rising*). Well, I'm quite at sea as to what a scoutmaster is, but of one thing I'm positive—the book is not by Coventry Patmore. . . . (*Waving his hand towards the perspective.*) Lady Swete. *Exit.*

MR. FIDLER. Damned ass !

COLONEL. Thinks he knows everything because he married the prettiest woman in London.

FISHERTON. Knows more than you'd give him credit for.

COLONEL. O, of course, you stick up for your brother-in-law just as you stick up for your cousin Wadey and his . . . But what's the good of talking.

FISHERTON. O, you can say what you like about Wadey. He's able to keep his end up. Not like the Bishop. I grant you he is a bit mad.

THE VICAR. Lord Wadebridge's brother?—Mad?

FISHERTON. O, only religiously—like Gordon and Joan of Arc. He doesn't suffer from delusions

COLONEL. Yes he does—or did till I cured him and so, I happen to know, does Wadebridge.

FISHERTON (*slightly irritated*). About what?

COLONEL. Actresses.

FISHERTON (*laughing incontinently*). What rot !

COLONEL. Well, of course, you know better than I. I dare say all you fellows have met Emily Lovely lots of times. I only knew her a bit longer than Lovely did. He met her when she was on the stage.

FISHERTON. Anyone that hasn't met her will meet her at dinner.

COLONEL (*open-eyed*). Lady Fisherton has asked her here ?

FISHERTON. Yes, she and Wadey are both coming. She's to be presented to the Marquess here.

COLONEL (*as one who despairs of the Republic*). Well, of course, it's not for me to say anything. . . .

Retires behind his paper.

MR. FIDLER (*to LORD FISHERTON*). But does the Marquess know she was an actress ?

FISHERTON (*coldly*). You'd better ask him.

THE VICAR (*feeling the need of tact*). I am sure she must be a most delightful and interesting woman. The only actress I ever met was Lady . . . Lady . . . I quite forget the name. She was a most delightful and interesting woman. Her husband, too, was an extremely intellectual man. He wrote a *Life of the Prince Consort*. There seems to be really no reason why an extremely intellectual man should not marry an actress if, besides being so delightful and interesting, she should also be as pure and good as the rest of her fascinating sex.

COLONEL (*grimly*). There are actresses and actresses.

THE VICAR. O, I don't doubt it. Even on the stage I have noticed a certain indescribable difference.

COLONEL (*staring fixedly at his paper*). You never saw Mabel Debenham act ?

THE VICAR. Mabel Debenham—what an extremely pretty name. . . . But it's like so many. I can't

quite recall it. Tell me, where does Miss Debenham appear ?

COLONEL. Her last appearance was before Mr. Justice Doncaster at the Central Criminal Court.

THE VICAR. Ah, dear me ! Actresses are so unfortunate. I suppose someone had stolen her trinkets.

COLONEL. No, she was in the dock.

THE VICAR (*troubled*). At the Central Criminal Court. . . . Then it was a serious charge ?

COLONEL. Murder.

THE VICAR (*upset*). O, . . . poor girl ! . . . I hope she'll get off.

FISHERTON (*who has been looking at the paper*). I'm afraid she's beyond hoping for now.

THE VICAR (*distressed*). O really, really !

COLONEL. Mr. Justice Doncaster passed sentence late last night.

THE VICAR (*vaguely*). Mr. Justice Doncaster . . .

MR. FIDLER. A sound judge ; even Sir Adolphus admitted that.

FISHERTON. Of a point-to-point race.

MR. FIDLER. If there were more Doncasters there would be fewer criminals.

FISHERTON. D'ye think he could hang them all ?

THE VICAR (*uncomfortably*). Excuse me—is this poor woman to be hanged ?

COLONEL. Why, of course, what else ? Murder is murder, isn't it ?

THE VICAR (*timidly*). I won't go so far as to say that I disapprove of capital punishment. . . .

MR. FIDLER. I should hope not, indeed.

THE VICAR. But when it comes to taking a woman and tying a rope round her neck and (*with a little shudder*) . . . Now, Colonel, would you care to do it?

COLONEL. Certainly not. Unless it became my duty. Then I should say to myself: a certain number of men have to be hanged in England every year . . .

THE VICAR. True, true; but a woman, Colonel, a woman?

COLONEL. A certain number of women have got to be hanged too. Someone's got to hang 'em. That always was the case and always will be.

THE VICAR (*with a sigh*). Ah, you think that?

COLONEL. I'm sure of it.

FISHERTON. Don't be too sure, Colonel.

COLONEL. Why not?

MR. FIDLER. You're not going to attack capital punishment?

FISHERTON. O, I'm nobody. I only want to be let alone.

MR. FIDLER. That's all I want; all any man of substance asks—but these damned new-fangled upstarts with ideas that any honest man would be ashamed of—these infernal Flops . . .

THE VICAR. Is Mr. Flop opposed to capital punishment?

MR. FIDLER (*with a snap*). He was opposed to me. He's in my place in Parliament. In a few years we shall have him, or some fellow like him, at the Local Government Board or the Home Office. . . . I dare say he will do away with capital punishment and the King and the Crown and property of all kinds.

COLONEL. I'm not sure that Wadebridge is much better than Flop.

MR. FIDLER (*generously*). O, yes; a gentleman is always a gentleman. He won't go against his own interests.

COLONEL. All I can say is that if Wadebridge tries to get that woman off I'll tell him to his face that he ought to be shot.

MR. FIDLER. If I believed him capable of such a thing I'd say ditto.

THE VICAR (*stretching out a hand to the paper*). Whom did the poor creature kill?

COLONEL. She killed her own child.

THE VICAR. Goodness gracious, how terrible!

COLONEL. You may well say that.

THE VICAR. Was it infanticide?

Looks at the paper.

COLONEL. Nothing of the kind. It was a boy. Twelve years old. Almost old enough for the Army.

THE VICAR. Dreadful to think of. (*Reading*). And she appears to be only thirty—why she must have been in her teens . . . (*looks up appealingly*).

COLONEL. She's not being hanged for what she did in her teens, but what she's done now.

THE VICAR. I don't quite follow you. They don't mention here the father of the child.

COLONEL. It was no business of his.

MR. FIDLER. We must draw the line somewhere.

FISHERTON. The question is—where?

THE VICAR (*still reading*). "As the learned Judge pronounced sentence in his most impressive tones, the prisoner fell forward, and was removed to the

cells, apparently unconscious." It really seems a little barbarous.

MR. FIDLER. How d'ye mean, barbarous? Isn't it the law?

COLONEL. The Vicar means because she fainted. But that was just hysteria, common among actresses.

FISHERTON (*grimly*). I've seen my wife faint.

COLONEL. Have you ever seen a man faint? That's something serious. But a tuppenny-halfpenny actress! Why, it's her livelihood to be able to do that sort of thing.

MR. FIDLER. And she won't have to do it any more.

THE VICAR. I'm afraid the report conveys very little to me. I can't even see a motive.

MR. FIDLER. There's only one motive for a woman killing her child—wanting to be rid of it. I suppose she thought she could act better without it.

FISHERTON. After twelve years! . . . I don't suppose the poor creature ever acted anywhere.

COLONEL. O, yes she did. . . . I knew her when she was upon the stage. (*Feeling the eyes of the others turned on him.*) Not intimately, of course, but I came across her casually, just as I know . . .

MR. FIDLER. Mrs. Lovely, eh?

FISHERTON (*looking off and rising*). Here's my wife with Lord Padstow. (*Rising.*) And who can that be walking beside the Marquess?

MR. FIDLER (*as they all get on their feet and look off*). He looks like a nigger parson from here.

COLONEL. Scarcely that. Not the build. Half-caste, perhaps.

THE VICAR. He's a white man really—a missionary—might be a Colonial bishop. . . .

FISHERTON (*starting*). Why, of course—it's Austin—Wadey's brother. I'd no idea he was in England. (*Moving forward to meet him.*) Good lord! how changed he is! *Exit.*

THE VICAR. The Bishop of Hippo, is it?

COLONEL (*hastily folding his paper*). Yes,—I shouldn't have known him from Adam.—(*Pulling nervously at his moustache.*) Odd—damned odd. . . .

MR. FIDLER (*confidentially to the COLONEL*). Tell us about that woman now.

THE COLONEL (*uneasily*). Mabel Debenham?

MR. FIDLER. O, no; hang her. The one Wadebridge is going to marry.

COLONEL (*deprecatingly*). It's a long story. . . . You see, Wadebridge and the Bishop . . .

THE VICAR (*to the COLONEL*). A splendid character he must be, though, I have heard, a little exaggerated.

COLONEL. We haven't met for twelve or thirteen years.

THE VICAR. Not since he entered the Church, perhaps?

COLONEL. Not since, no. Isn't he a bit young for a bishop?

MR. FIDLER. Another job, eh?

THE VICAR. O, bishops *in partibus* are not quite the same thing. They want energy more than experience.

COLONEL. Austin Straight had plenty of energy. I've seen him knock a man heels over tip.

MR. FIDLER. Muscular Christianity—that's the way to convert the heathen.

THE VICAR. It is easier to convert a thousand heathen than to bring one strayed sheep back to the fold.

COLONEL. Hum! But I suppose one strayed sheep back in the fold would have a devilish keen eye for other strays?

MR. FIDLER. That sounds like one in the eye for the Bishop, eh?

THE VICAR. We have the Confession of the greatest Bishop of Hippo that he was wild in youth.

COLONEL. Who was that? I thought Straight was the first.

THE VICAR. He's the first Anglican Bishop. But you've read the Confessions of Saint Augustine?

COLONEL. Can't say that I have. Did he mention that he was thrown out of a music-hall?

MR. FIDLER (*delighted*). What a lark! . . . Was the Bishop?

COLONEL. If Austin Straight writes his confessions they'll drive the other chap's off the market.

THE VICAR. I protest, Sir; you have no right to rake up any man's past.

COLONEL (*annoyed*). I'd like to see any man question my right to do exactly as I please.

MR. FIDLER (*warningly*). Not just now, Colonel; the Marquess mightn't like it.

COLONEL (*calming down*). O, of course, the Marquess . . .

He becomes quite genial as there enter LADY FISHERTON, a pleasing, plainly dressed, healthy-

looking society woman, with the MARQUESS OF PADSTOW, a man of seventy who looks not much less than his age, but carries himself with the spring of a man twenty years younger.

PADSTOW (*in a friendly tone to the VICAR*). Well, Sir, not disestablished yet, after all? Time to breathe under the new Government, eh?

THE VICAR. I've been warned it won't last six months.

PADSTOW. Wadey's going to wreck it, I suppose. O, well, while there's life there's hope, and now that Wadey's going to be married he may settle down.

MR. FIDLER. You approve of his marriage, Sir?

PADSTOW. Well, he's been a bit of a wallflower, you know. . . . By the way, I'm glad you've given the Commons the go by, Mr. Fidler; they're simply pining for you in the House of Lords.

MR. FIDLER (*with humility*). If Mr. Church insisted, of course . . .

PADSTOW. He wouldn't insist on more than you could afford.

COLONEL. Not like those confounded Radicals—take a man's boots before they'd give him a baronetcy.

PADSTOW (*looking at him for the first time*). I think I am right in saying that you are not Lord Kitchener.

LADY FISHERTON. I'm so sorry, Uncle. I thought you knew Colonel Gower.

PADSTOW. No doubt, no doubt. At my age I can't remember everything. Fisherton told me you were a first-class shot.

COLONEL (*partly mollified*). I've gunned a little all my life.

PADSTOW. Indeed! . . . My sport was picture-buying. It doesn't hurt the pictures, but you can't eat them, of course.

COLONEL. But, my lord, you wouldn't call picture-buying sport?

PADSTOW. No, true; it's fun for the dealers, but death for the artists. . . . My boy Wadey's fad is humanitarianism. If his wife can't cure him he'll be crucified one morning in Palace Yard.

LADY FISHERTON. Why not Tower Hill?

PADSTOW. Too many Socialists.

COLONEL. If I could march 'em into the Tower ditch I'd . . .

PADSTOW. Gun a little, eh? Tell Wadey and see what he says.

COLONEL. I don't know Lord Wadebridge, I used to know Austin.

PADSTOW. Austin must be younger than you.

COLONEL (*smiling*). I'm a bachelor.

PADSTOW. So's he, and likely to be; but I bet you sixpence he won't know you now. Here he is. Just try.

Enter LORD FISHERTON with LORD AUSTIN STRAIGHT, Bishop of the Church of England in Hippo. He is a man of fierce passions now centred in religion, his age just under forty. There is something warlike, challenging, and visionary in his mien; and if one saw and heard him speak without catching the words one might take him to be a naval officer who had suffered a sunstroke.

He is, however, granting his premises, sane and logical.

COLONEL (*nodding to the BISHOP*). 'Day, Straight ; the Marquess says you've forgotten me.

THE BISHOP (*wincing but immediately recovering himself and looking at him boldly*). My father is mistaken.

COLONEL (*bowing to the Marquess, rather too elate*). Settlement at your convenience.

MARQUESS. Tut ! Austin's too polite to say anything else. (*To the BISHOP*.) What is he ? Can you tell us that ?

THE BISHOP. If you wish to know . . .

PADSTOW. At least, what is his name ?

THE BISHOP (*with an effort of memory*). Debenham.

THE VICAR. Deb . . .

He and LORD FISHERTON exchange glances,
MR. FIDLER *laughs.*

PADSTOW (*amused*). I thought I wasn't far wrong.

COLONEL (*acidly*). If you think that is my name, Austin, I'm afraid you haven't acquired much wisdom in Africa.

THE BISHOP. I have learned the folly of the wise.

PADSTOW. And dismissed them from memory.

THE BISHOP. I do not forget this man though I may be mistaken as to his name. He was in the Wessex Fusiliers, his battalion was at Chatham. I saw him last at a club near Leicester Square.

PADSTOW (*to COLONEL*). Near Leicester Square ?
Do you belong to the Garrick ?

COLONEL. No, it was another club.

THE BISHOP (*with a sudden snap of painful recollection*). The Lyric.

LADY FISHERTON (*scenting trouble*). O, Marquess, anyhow it's evident you owe the Colonel sixpence.

PADSTOW (*with playful obstinacy*). Not a bit of it. I don't call that knowing a man, if you really think he's somebody else. And, anyhow, I plead the Gaming Act.

THE BISHOP (*gravely*). Shall I give the Colonel sixpence?

PADSTOW. There now, Austin, you're more humane than I thought. I feared you mightn't approve of your father betting.

THE BISHOP. Nor do I. But a compact is a compact.

PADSTOW. A good Churchman ought not to say "Bosh!" (*Taking LADY FISHERTON'S arm.*) Bring me to Wadey and his Mrs. Lovely; perhaps I am fitter for their society.

Exit with LADY FISHERTON.

THE BISHOP (*apologetically to the COLONEL*). My father is old—you will allow me?

Offers him sixpence.

COLONEL (*brusquely, pushing his hand away*). Keep it for your heathen.

THE BISHOP (*restraining a natural desire to knock him down*). Thank you. (*Pocketing the sixpence and bowing humbly.*) You shall be remembered in their prayers.

MR. FIDLER. By the name of Debenham, eh? (*Heartily rubbing his hands.*) Fancy you and the Colonel being old friends. (*Following the BISHOP,*

who turns away.) His name is Gower, you know. What made you think it was Debenham?

THE BISHOP (*avoiding MR. FIDLER and turning to LORD FISHERTON*). Who is this woman father went to meet—Wadey's Mrs. . . .

FISHERTON. Mrs. Lovely. O, she's engaged to Wadey, we understand. Didn't you know?

THE BISHOP (*regretfully*). I am not in my brother's confidence. . . . I know nothing of what happens in England that does not directly affect our Mission. I am shocked and grieved that he should marry a widow.

THE VICAR. Is not your lordship a little severe?

THE BISHOP (*coldly*). I regret that you should find me so.

THE VICAR (*mildly, yet standing to his guns*). I cannot recall any rule of the Church against a layman marrying a widow.

THE BISHOP (*almost resentfully*). Why, even Jeremy Taylor . . .

THE VICAR. Is dead and buried three hundred years.

THE BISHOP. There is One dead and buried nearly two thousand . . .

THE VICAR (*gently and sincerely*). We believe He rose from the dead and will come again.

THE BISHOP (*with fierce contempt*). So I hear you say.

FISHERTON (*with quiet reproof*). Austin, this conversation is a little difficult for laymen.

MR. FIDLER. O, go on; go on!

COLONEL. By all means. I like to hear other chaps talk shop.

FISHERTON (*to* BISHOP). You see, the effect you produce is not so edifying as you may imagine.

THE BISHOP. I was not talking for talking's sake. (*Firing again.*) I was trying to wake this priest to the understanding of the only thing that matters.

MR. FIDLER (*softly, nudging the* COLONEL). Actresses?

COLONEL (*in the same tone*). Et cetera.

THE VICAR (*amiably*). I shall always be grateful for your Lordship's instruction.

FISHERTON. But I warn your Lordship that you won't find your brother so patient as the Vicar.

THE BISHOP. I know my brother's character only too well.

COLONEL (*mischievously*). Better than he knows yours?

THE BISHOP. I am afraid I do not understand the question. (*Civilly.*) I have spoken with no white man for six years, except my humble brethren.

FISHERTON. Your subordinates, in fact.

COLONEL. You wouldn't hear any questions from them.

MR. FIDLER. No jolly fear of their wanting to argue.

THE BISHOP. We do not argue. I seek to set them a good example which they endeavour to follow.

COLONEL. Poor devils!

MR. FIDLER. You haven't told us why you thought the Colonel's name was Debenham.

THE BISHOP (*to* LORD FISHERTON, *ignoring* MR. FIDLER). Has this woman been long a widow?

FISHERTON (*to the COLONEL*). How long is it since Lovely was killed?

COLONEL. It will be twelve years on Friday since the fight at Boombosch. He died next day.

THE BISHOP. Had they any children?

FISHERTON. I think not.

COLONEL. They were only married a few weeks when the war broke out.

FISHERTON. And she was quite a child herself then.

COLONEL (*nodding*). In her teens.

MR. FIDLER (*humorously*). But not such a fool as Miss Mabel Debenham.

THE BISHOP (*glaring*). Whom did you say?

MR. FIDLER (*slily*). Only an old flame of the Colonel's.

FISHERTON (*seeing the BISHOP turn faint, puts out a hand to him*). Austin!

THE VICAR (*steadying him on the other side*). My lord!

COLONEL (*to MR. FIDLER*). I cannot allow a joke of that kind.

MR. FIDLER (*intrenched in his self-importance*). Go on! A harmless bit of fun.

THE BISHOP (*pulling himself together*). It's nothing. I'm all right again. They sent me back to England because of . . .

FISHERTON (*anxiously*). You'd better come slowly back to the house and lie down.

THE VICAR. I must be going that way too.

THE BISHOP. Perhaps I had better—though I

know it's nothing—some phantom of a dead idea. Did not Saint Jerome—or was it Cyprian . . .

THE VICAR (*soothingly*). Yes, my lord, tell us about that.

THE BISHOP (*in a tone of dull melancholy*). I thought I should never see England again . . . and now. . . . If Adam had re-entered Eden . . .

THE VICAR (*gently urging him towards the house*). If, indeed, my lord!

THE BISHOP. What bitterness!

Exit between LORD FISHERTON and the VICAR.

COLONEL (*looking after him*). I always thought he was a bit mad, but never that he would develop into a maundering imbecile like that.

MR. FIDLER. Now's the chance to tell me about Wadebridge's Merry Widow.

COLONEL (*shortly*). I'm not sure that it's safe to tell you things.

MR. FIDLER (*too curious to be offended*). Why not?

COLONEL. What do you want to know?

MR. FIDLER. Just whether she's a warm member.

COLONEL. How do I know?

MR. FIDLER. But you knew her when she was on the stage—the same as Mabel Debenham.

COLONEL. If I say I did? . . .

MR. FIDLER (*nobly*). O, I don't want you to give any woman away; but was she the same as Mabel Debenham?

COLONEL. Except that she was better bred, there wasn't sixpence to choose between them.

MR. FIDLER (*delighted*). D'ye tell me so?

COLONEL (*warming to his subject*). They were in

the same chorus, they shared the same rooms. . . . I'm not sure they didn't share the same shoes and stockings.

MR. FIDLER (*sardonically*). Well, they're in very different shoes now.

COLONEL. They are. Mabel Debenham didn't get the chance to marry a sentimental ass like Lovely.

MR. FIDLER. And d'ye suppose Milly, or whatever her name is, has kept straight since he was killed?

COLONEL. I wouldn't thank her for keeping straight on four thousand a year.

MR. FIDLER. No, indeed. Thank you for nothing.

COLONEL. I dare say Mabel Debenham wouldn't be going to be hanged if she had four thousand a year.

MR. FIDLER. No, indeed. She could have briefed the pick of the bar to defend her. . . . But some women are naturally wicked. I had my pocket picked by one . . .

COLONEL (*interrupting him as voices are heard*). Here's Padstow coming back with Lady Fisherton, and (*seizing his arm*) look here through the hedge. Here's our beauty.

MR. FIDLER (*peering through hedge*). Whom did you say?

COLONEL. Emily Lovely.

MR. FIDLER (*critically*). That she? Nice-looking woman. . . . Fascinating, as the Vicar would say. . . . You'd find it hard to get a jury to convict her.

Enter LADY FISHERTON and LORD PADSTOW on left and right of MRS. LOVELY, an attractive woman

not under thirty, well dressed but too quietly to be called fashionable.

PADSTOW (*talking to her as if he had known her all his life*). No, no, my dear Emily. Just because Wadey has performed the miracle of winning your heart, you mustn't expect Gardiner Church and the whole Cabinet to sit at his feet.

MRS. LOVELY. But Wadey is so much wiser than everyone else.

PADSTOW. He'll have to dissemble like mad at every Council.

MRS. LOVELY. O, you're wickedly cynical.

PADSTOW. Wickedly cynical?—I? D'ye know I've held more important offices, so called, than any Conservative living. And why? Because the three premiers I served under agreed that I was too dull to see anything unpleasant.

MRS. LOVELY. Is that to give me hope that I may please you?

PADSTOW. Don't make me jealous of Wadey. A poor thing but mine own. . . . The Bishop's a changeling.

LADY FISHERTON (*to MRS. LOVELY*). Emily, let me introduce Mr. Fidler and Colonel Gower.

COLONEL (*as bows are exchanged*). I have the pleasure of knowing Mrs. Lovely.

MRS. LOVELY (*politely*). Yes, indeed. How strange to meet you. I was thinking of you the other day.

COLONEL. Flattered, I'm sure.

MRS. LOVELY. I wondered if you could tell me what has become of Mabel Debenham.

COLONEL (*quite taken aback*). Mabel Debenham !
Hum ! . . .

MRS. LOVELY. Yes, I quite lost sight of her.

MR. FIDLER. You don't read the papers ?

MRS. LOVELY. O, yes I do. *The Morning Post* every day and the *Observer* on Sundays. Lord Wadebridge expects me to know everything that's happening in the political world.

LADY FISHERTON. My dear, that's only half the world.

PADSTOW. Wadey was never interested in the other half, unfortunately.

MRS. LOVELY. Why "unfortunately" ? Hasn't he chosen the better side ?

PADSTOW. All one side—good or bad—is lopsided. That's Wadey's weakness.

MRS. LOVELY. He has no weakness. He's all pure strength.

PADSTOW. No weakness for you ?

MRS. LOVELY. The strength of victory.

PADSTOW. That put Antony to flight ?

MRS. LOVELY (*smiling and shaking her head*). You don't know him as I do.

PADSTOW. I hope to know him better through you.

MRS. LOVELY. You're a flatterer.

PADSTOW. Well, Wadey isn't. That's a fact.

MRS. LOVELY. He flatters by deeds, not words.

PADSTOW. Clever of him. But how ?

MRS. LOVELY. The first time we met he kissed my hand.

PADSTOW. The smooth-faced villain !

LADY FISHERTON. He often kissed Rachel's hand, she says . . .

MRS. LOVELY (*stung*). Rachel?

LADY FISHERTON (*quickly*). My sister—Lady Swete.

PADSTOW. A delightful creature and most untruthful.

COLONEL. Perhaps Lady Swete is no worse than other women.

PADSTOW (*turning on him*). Worse! She is better, my dear Sir,—better. She never pretends to tell the truth.

MRS. LOVELY. What have women done to you, Lord Padstow, that you have such a poor opinion of them?

PADSTOW. They have ignored me. . . . Just as, until you came along, I believe, upon my word, they have ignored Wadey.

MRS. LOVELY. But he's not cynical about women.

PADSTOW. Nor shall I be in another two minutes.

LADY FISHERTON. Here's Rachel to speak for herself.

PADSTOW. Her strength lies in attack

Enter LADY SWETE, a younger, better-looking, and altogether more dashing version of her sister, followed by SIR ADOLPHUS.

LADY SWETE. You were talking of me, I can see that.

SIR ADOLPHUS. And she was talking of herself; you might have heard that.

LADY SWETE. It's so hard to find anything else to talk about with him.

PADSTOW. Is Coventry Patmore exhausted ?

LADY SWETE. I am.

MR. FIDLER. Perhaps, Lady Swete, you can tell us who wrote "Greater than all things two things are, the one thing is woman and the other thing is war."

LADY SWETE (*feeling confident that no one can contradict her*). Chesterton.

FIDLER (*vaguely*). O, of course, Lord Chesterton.

LADY SWETE (*to MRS. LOVELY*). We met at Goodwood ?

MRS. LOVELY (*simply*). I don't think I've ever been there.

LADY FISHERTON. Rachel, this is Mrs. Lovely, you know she is going to marry Wadey.

LADY SWETE (*sharply*). Nonsense !

PADSTOW (*easily*). Ah, I knew you'd say that, Rachel. But it is a fact, I assure you, that Wadey has persuaded Mrs. Lovely to marry him.

LADY FISHERTON. He's not quite such a fool as she tries to make out.

LADY SWETE. O, not a fool. Only very dull.

PADSTOW (*to MRS. LOVELY*). When Lady Swete tells you anyone is dull, that means respectable. I'm the dullest person she knows.

LADY SWETE. O, no. Adolphus takes precedence.

SIR ADOLPHUS. Only in my own house, dear.

LADY SWETE. Mrs. Lovely had better come and judge for herself.

SIR ADOLPHUS. If she only would, I'd cudgel my wits to entertain her.

PADSTOW. Be content with sending them to

Wormwood Scrubs. (To MRS. LOVELY.) Lady Swete's drawing-room is a mere ante-room to her husband's court.

MRS. LOVELY (*looking at SIR ADOLPHUS with disappointed awe*). Are you a judge? How dreadful.

SIR ADOLPHUS. Not at all. Whatever may have befallen one or two of Lady Swete's *chevaliers d'industrie*, ladies leave my court without a stain upon their character.

MRS. LOVELY (*smiling, yet slightly shocked*). But Justice is blind.

SIR ADOLPHUS. As an owl. . . . Only one can't help hearing the pretty voices. . . . Even that lantern-jawed fellow, the Home Secretary . . .

MRS. LOVELY (*puzzled*). Wadey?

SIR ADOLPHUS. Is most susceptible to a pretty voice, I'm told.

LADY SWETE. Any sort of pretty pretty.

SIR ADOLPHUS (*to MRS. LOVELY*). You'll ask him not to slap me too hard, won't you?

MRS. LOVELY. What for?

SIR ADOLPHUS. The rash judgments and foolish talk of a silly old man.

MRS. LOVELY. But you don't talk foolishly when you're on the Bench, do you?

SIR ADOLPHUS. My dear Mrs. Lovely! Even if my wife allowed me to be wise the laws of my country would forbid it.

MRS. LOVELY (*impulsively sympathetic*). O, Lord Wadebridge has told me how iniquitous some are.

MR. FIDLER. Nice thing for the Home Secretary to talk about at tea-parties.

LADY SWETE (*to MRS. LOVELY*). You mean his view of divorce, of course ?

MRS. LOVELY. I wasn't thinking of that.

SIR ADOLPHUS. Well I'm sure if he takes his views from you none of His Majesty's judges will quarrel with them.

MR. FIDLER. What about Doncaster ?

SIR ADOLPHUS. Ah, well, I'd forgotten poor Doncaster. One hardly takes him seriously, you know.

PADSTOW. Would you sustain that attitude in the dock before him ?

SIR ADOLPHUS. O, certainly. Doncaster would never round on a pal.

MR. FIDLER. I've always heard him spoken of with the greatest respect.

SIR ADOLPHUS. And quite right too. He's a wonderful old man for his years. And I don't know a better fellow off the Bench.

PADSTOW. It wouldn't astonish me if soon we should see him at his best.

MRS. LOVELY (*with a sudden joyous cry*). Here's Wadey !

LADY SWETE. I've been watching him quite a little while ; . . . but then, of course, I know him better than you.

MRS. LOVELY. Oh !

LADY FISHERTON. Rachel knows a man's hat at a mile.

LADY SWETE. Wadey wears his at the back of his head.

MRS. LOVELY. He hates to wear one at all.

LADY SWETE. Perhaps you can teach him that a door must be open or shut.

Enter LORD WADEBRIDGE, a clean-shaven man, looking more like a guardsman of George III than a statesman of George V, and this despite the fact that he wears a billycock hat quite frankly on the back of his head and carries a pipe between his teeth. He does not suggest intellectuality so much as honest intelligence backed by driving force. Like his younger brother, the Bishop, his voice can take a cruel note, but he betrays no tendency to hysteria.

LADY FISHERTON. O, Emily, how can you let Wadey carry that horrid pipe !

LADY SWETE. Is poor Wadey not even to be allowed to smoke ?

WADEBRIDGE (*gravely dropping the pipe in an inside pocket*). No, I wasn't smoking. I was only chawing it. It helps me to think.

PADSTOW. You don't mean to say you go on thinking now you're in the Cabinet.

WADEBRIDGE. Yes, Dad ; what brains you gave me I'm still using.

PADSTOW. I thought the Home Secretary nowadays did everything by telephone.

WADEBRIDGE. I'm going to telephone presently.

LADY SWETE (*to her sister*). Well, if it's a trunk call hadn't someone better tell Sims to clear the line ?

LADY FISHERTON. If you'll tell me what you want, Wadey, I'll go.

WADEBRIDGE. All right, Agatha. Time enough. Has anyone a motor to lend me ?

PADSTOW. Take mine, Mr. New Broom.

WADEBRIDGE. Thanks for the machine, Dad, and thanks for the name. If there were no new brooms nothing would ever be clean.

SIR ADOLPHUS. In confidence, Mr. Secretary, am I to be swept off the Bench ?

WADEBRIDGE. In confidence, Mr. Justice, a very eminent person tells me you're the only man he knows who ought never to have been put on the Bench, and ought never to be allowed to retire from it.

SIR ADOLPHUS (*delighted*). That's the Chancellor. Good old boy. I used to devil for him.

LADY SWETE. And the first labour of Hercules ?

WADEBRIDGE. Not to be shouted from the rooftops.

LADY SWETE. Then I suppose you won't trust any woman with it ?

MRS. LOVELY. Why should any woman want to be trusted with it ?

PADSTOW. Lady Swete wants it for her next conversazione.

LADY SWETE. Wadey knows whether I can keep a secret.

SIR ADOLPHUS. My dear, we all know that you keep them at the public expense.

MR. FIDLER (*to WADEBRIDGE pompously*). I hope, Sir, you don't propose to do anything rash.

WADEBRIDGE (*simply*). No ; rather to prevent rash things being done.

MR. FIDLER. But not to interfere with the course of law and justice.

WADEBRIDGE (*smiling slightly*). It's a very old riddle, but which do you mean—law or justice?

MR. FIDLER. That's a question for a Home Secretary to ask.

WADEBRIDGE. And for a County Magistrate to answer.

MR. FIDLER. If you did your duty as I do mine . . .

WADEBRIDGE. I should have more time to gossip with you.

PADSTOW. Tut, Wadey. I can't lend you my car if you start by offending the county Bench.

MR. FIDLER (*tossing his head*). O, I'm not offended. No one is going to take the new Home Secretary seriously.

WADEBRIDGE. I wonder.

MR. FIDLER. Or if they do, the new Home Secretary will lose his job.

WADEBRIDGE (*mildly*). Still, even a week of it allows one to do some good in the world.

MR. FIDLER. I don't believe you'll be at the Home Office long enough to do anything but get into mischief.

WADEBRIDGE. What do you understand by mischief?

MR. FIDLER. O, I mean interfering with other people; sticking your nose where it isn't wanted. . . .

WADEBRIDGE (*amused*). How would you advise me to earn my salary?

MR. FIDLER. Why, by keeping quiet and letting the permanent staff of your department carry on the work as it was done before you were born.

WADEBRIDGE. But suppose that I find my permanent staff object to carrying on the work as it was done before I was born. Suppose that the most efficient and in every way the best of them regard the eighteen sixties as the dark ages. . . .

PADSTOW. They wouldn't be so very far wrong.

MR. FIDLER (*with an apologetic groan*). O, if I have you too against me . . .

WADEBRIDGE. A certain person called my attention this morning to the fact that there was a poor girl sentenced to death yesterday for killing her child.

MRS. LOVELY (*with a sudden flash of anger*). For killing her child !

PADSTOW (*pityingly*). O dear ! O dear !

MRS. LOVELY. How can anyone pity a woman who has killed her child ?

MR. FIDLER. Hear, hear !

COLONEL. Hear, hear !

LADY FISHERTON. Stuff and nonsense, Emily. No woman should ever condemn another.

LADY SWETE. And it is so dangerous for persons in glass houses to throw stones.

MRS. LOVELY. But a woman who has killed her child !

WADEBRIDGE (*coldly*). You cannot imagine any possible justification for that ?

MRS. LOVELY (*troubled by his tone, looks at him and answers firmly*). No, I cannot.

Then she drops her eyes and turns away.

LADY SWETE. I'm afraid I am not so hard-hearted.

MRS. LOVELY (*to her*). Have you any children ?

LADY SWETE. O, yes. Three dear little things. Have you ?

MRS. LOVELY. No.

PADSTOW (*to* LADY FISHERTON). What's become of Austin ?

LADY FISHERTON. I suppose he's in the house ; it's nearly time to dress.

PADSTOW. Let's go, then. (*Strolling off with* LADY FISHERTON.) Come, Mr. Fidler, tell me some more about Wadey's shortcomings so that I may brace myself for the higher life with the Bishop.

MR. FIDLER. O, anything I said was in fun—a harmless bit of fun.

Exit with PADSTOW *and* LADY FISHERTON.

LADY SWETE. If we leave you alone with Mrs. Lovely, Wadey, do you think you could convert her to our point of view ?

WADEBRIDGE (*shortly*). I have no idea.

LADY SWETE. O, well, if you're going to be a bear, I'm sure we don't want your company, do we, Colonel ?

COLONEL. No, by Jove. . . . But Sir Adolphus ?

SIR ADOLPHUS. Pray go on . . . I follow. . . . (*After* LADY SWETE *and the* COLONEL *are gone he turns to* MRS. LOVELY.) Pardon me, dear lady. This new Home Secretary is a very self-sufficient young man—but he may be right. (*MRS. LOVELY looks at him very surprised, then gives him her hand, which he kisses.*) We shall meet at dinner.

Exit, taking his time.

WADEBRIDGE (*as their eyes meet*). Still angry with me ?

MRS. LOVELY (*stretching out her arms to him but without approaching him*). Angry with you? O, my beloved, my beloved!

WADEBRIDGE (*seeing her distressed*). What's the matter?

MRS. LOVELY. I've something to tell you. . . . Something I should have told you before . . . but I hoped . . . I hoped in vain.

WADEBRIDGE (*in a soothing voice as he moves towards her*). Why should you tell me anything that distresses you?

MRS. LOVELY (*firmly*). I must. . . .

WADEBRIDGE (*holding her right hand and stroking it gently, while her left hand rests on his arm*). Well then, let's have it.

MRS. LOVELY (*in a deep voice*). I was so furious with that poor wretch who killed her child because I learned yesterday for certain . . . O, Wadey, I shall never be able . . .

Drops her head on his shoulder sobbing.

WADEBRIDGE (*trying to quiet her*). Emily, I . . .

MRS. LOVELY. Don't say anything now. . . . Just think . . . what it means to both of us and then . . . perhaps to-morrow . . .

Her head falls, in a fresh burst of tears.

WADEBRIDGE. Poor little Emily. Don't cry, don't cry. . . . There's the dinner-bell. The great hour of the day has come. It's a funny world, isn't it?

MRS. LOVELY (*drying her eyes*). It's been such a happy world since I met you.

Threatens to break down.

WADEBRIDGE. There now, I shan't believe you if you cry. Come, come ; time to dress. We mustn't be late.

MRS. LOVELY. You can't be in a hurry for dinner, Wadey.

WADEBRIDGE. I have to go back to town to-night.

MRS. LOVELY (*clasping her hands painfully*). You're leaving me already !

WADEBRIDGE. Only for to-night, dear ; only for to-night.

MRS. LOVELY. Where are you going ? (*Overcome with repentance*). O, forgive me for asking, Wadey.

WADEBRIDGE. There, why shouldn't you ask ? I'm going to gaol, that's all.

MRS. LOVELY (*bewildered*). To gaol ? Where ?

WADEBRIDGE. Anywhere away from you is gaol to me . . . sweet wife that is to be.

The sun is down and the dusk is falling as he takes her with infinite gentleness in his arms, when suddenly out of nowhere bursts MAY FISHERTON, a jolly red-haired damsel of seventeen.

MAY. O, Wadey, I'm so sorry to disturb you, but . . .

WADEBRIDGE (*startled*). Eh ! . . .

MAY. I do so want you to help me, please.

WADEBRIDGE. What's the matter ?

MAY. I want to marry Tom Smith.

WADEBRIDGE. And what—as your Uncle Adolphus would say—is Tom Smith ?

MAY. O, he's in the Army. He's very nearly a First Lieutenant.

WADEBRIDGE (*at a loss*). What does your mother say ?

MAY. Aunt Rachel has put her off because . . . (*slightly ashamed*) he's an Engineer.

MRS. LOVELY (*looking up at WADEBRIDGE*). So was my father.

MAY (*taking courage*). And besides, Tom isn't like an ordinary Sapper. . . . He doesn't wriggle in the earth—he flies about in an aeroplane. He's one of the Royal Flying Corps.

WADEBRIDGE. So the Sappers are looking up in the world.

MAY. Rather !

WADEBRIDGE. But what am I to do ?

MAY (*eagerly*). If you were to say to the Marquess that it was all right, then he'd say to Mamma that it was all right, and then that silly, interfering Aunt Rachel could go to the dickens.

WADEBRIDGE. But how am I to know that it's all right ?

MAY. O, I'll introduce Tom to Mrs. Lovely, and she'll see at once that he's all right, and she'll tell you that it is all right, and . . .

MRS. LOVELY (*taking her hand and looking at her*). Do you really love him ?

MAY (*ecstatically*) You simply can't imagine how I love him . . . but I'll tell you . . . (*clenching both her hands*) I love him like blazes.

The dinner-bell is heard as the CURTAIN falls.

ACT II

The library at Fisherton Abbey, 11 a.m. A sombre room with one door L.C. to house and great French windows in back wall giving on a terrace with marble balustrade. The world outside is flooded with sunshine, but none enters the room. The furniture and decoration is prim but not undignified early Victorian. LORD PADSTOW seated in an armchair by the fire talks to MRS. LOVELY, who is sometimes standing near him and sometimes wandering restlessly by the window.

PADSTOW. Well, my dear Emily, I'm glad Wadey has made you understand that although we may not feel our digestions equal to swallowing the proposals of the Fabian Society *en bloc*, the more fortunate persons in England do not necessarily regard the less fortunate as enemies.

MRS. LOVELY. I never thought that, but . . .

PADSTOW. I know your experience of life has been unhappy.

MRS. LOVELY. How do you know?

PADSTOW. At seventy I have learned to see—Wadey helped to teach me.

MRS. LOVELY. He has taught me too—incredible things.

PADSTOW. And Lovely—he must have been a good sort.

MRS. LOVELY. Except my father, he was the only good man I ever knew until I met Wadey.

PADSTOW (*touched*). O, come, Emily, we're not all Fidlers and Gowers.

MRS. LOVELY (*doubtfully*). I suppose I've not been lucky—until I met Wadey.

PADSTOW. There are plenty of good people in the world, and the average grows better year by year.

MRS. LOVELY. You do believe that?

PADSTOW. Certainly. Look at Fisherton, he's a thoroughly good-hearted and well-meaning man, devoted to his wife and daughter. Now his father . . . Well, we'll let him lie quietly. But the child—have you spoken to her?

MRS. LOVELY. May? Yes, we've had quite long talks last night and this morning.

PADSTOW. Isn't she the perfection of a young English girl?

MRS. LOVELY. I think she is . . . and she's very eager to support your argument.

PADSTOW. How?

MRS. LOVELY. She tells me she has found the perfection of an English boy.

PADSTOW. Um! . . . Not the little aviator who came a purler in the meadow?

MRS. LOVELY. Yes. He really seems a splendid boy: intelligent, brave, and, as I understand it, honourable.

PADSTOW. No money, no position, of course?

MRS. LOVELY. No, I'm afraid not.

PADSTOW. Well, I've always been an incorrigible romantic, but her parents won't hear of it. Agatha and Rachel. . . . Besides, they're years too young.

MRS. LOVELY (*at window*). There's May crossing the lawn. May I call her in ?

PADSTOW. O, it's always fun to talk to May.

MRS. LOVELY *opens the window, goes on to terrace and waves her handkerchief. There is a hurryscurry of young feet and MAY plunges on to terrace and hugs MRS. LOVELY.*

MAY. You dear thing! I knew you'd do it. (*Handing the MARQUESS a Madame Chatenay bud to smell.*) I've brought you a buttonhole and a kiss.

PADSTOW. You remind me of the Duchess of Devonshire at the Westminster election.

MAY (*as she pins in the bud*). The month before last ?

PADSTOW. No, the century before last.

MAY. Do you really remember that, Marquess ?

PADSTOW. O, yes, and the Act of Settlement.

MAY. When was that ?

PADSTOW. 1692. Well! what's all this I hear about the man in the moon or a balloon or something ?

MAY (*eagerly*). O, not a balloon, Marquess; balloons are lighter than air—Tom doesn't believe in them. What he believes in is the power of machinery heavier than air. . . .

PADSTOW. At any rate he believes in something.

MAY. O, rather! he's firmly convinced that aeroplanes . . .

PADSTOW. And you believe in him ?

MAY. O, he's so scientific. I'm firmly convinced that he . . .

PADSTOW. Knows what he's talking about ?

MAY. That's it. We're just like Mrs. Lovely and Wadey. Aren't we, Mrs. Lovely ?

MRS. LOVELY (*with a rather sad smile*). Why don't you say like Darby and Joan?

MAY. O, they're past their best work. Not like us.

PADSTOW (*nodding*). Like me. I'm Darby and I've lost my Joan.

MAY (*ashamed of herself*). O, Marquess! I am sorry!

PADSTOW. Don't be sorry. I'm not so scientific as to believe I can't find her again.

MAY. O, Tom's not too scientific to think the most beautiful thoughts about death.

PADSTOW. What does he think about death?

MAY. He says it's the most glorious thing of all if it only comes at the right time and in the right way.

PADSTOW (*with a grunt*). Ah! Then you wire to Tom, if you can, to fly over here to-day if he can.

MAY (*suddenly anxious*). Of course, he can, but— (*scanning the sky*) I'm not sure this is quite the right weather for his sort of aeroplane.

PADSTOW. It looks fine enough.

MAY. But the air may be full of pockets.

PADSTOW. Like a billiard-table. He won't mind being pocketed if he's in love with you.

MAY. But he might be killed.

PADSTOW. He won't mind even that if he's in love with you.

MAY. But you forget that I'm in love with him and that I'd mind.

PADSTOW (*with affected indifference*). You'd soon get over it.

MAY. If I did, wouldn't that make it worse?

PADSTOW. If he's in love with you he won't think so.

MAY. O, well, anyhow it's the duty of a wife to see her husband doesn't hurt himself.

PADSTOW. So you've got as far as that, have you?

MAY. Not quite. But then, of course, ten years passes in less than no time.

PADSTOW. It does. You're quite right. Well, tell him to ask his Colonel to wheel him over in a perambulator. . . .

MAY (*gravely*). Is that necessary?

PADSTOW. However he comes, I'd like to see him.

MAY. O, thank you, Marquess! And you will tell mother to let me marry him?

PADSTOW. I'll tell your mother that if he's as fine a chap as you make out I'd think him good enough for my daughter.

MAY. I'll wire at once.

Rushes off.

PADSTOW. So even Cupid's up-to-date. Throwing bombs out of a flying machine.

MRS. LOVELY. It makes one feel very old.

PADSTOW (*rising*). It makes me feel very young. . . . Let's take a walk through a ploughed field. (*Looking at her in the sunlight on the terrace.*) I like you, Emily. . . . If Tom Smith's as good as you I'll endow him.

They go down into garden. Enter through other door MR. FIDLER and the COLONEL. The latter takes an ordnance map out of cabinet and places it on the table to study, while FIDLER lounges at open window to finish his cigar.

MR. FIDLER (*to COLONEL, who is poring over the map*). I tell you a vixen always dies game.

COLONEL. No; give me a dog fox.

MR. FIDLER. O, nonsense. I tell you this one gave me the best run I ever had in my life. We found at the covert under Gallows Hill, where I showed you on the map. She brought us down by Four Mile Brook, across the Hungerford road, and hounds killed in the meadow beyond. Come here and I'll point you the exact spot. (*As the COLONEL joins him at the window.*) There, just behind where you see that motor. (*Surprised.*) That's the Marquess's car, I do believe.

COLONEL (*looking at clock*). Wadebridge back already! Why at twenty miles an hour he must have left town at six in the morning.

MR. FIDLER. I reckon he made more than that. No police traps for the Home Secretary—and his young woman waiting for him.

COLONEL (*shaking his head*). Now they've quarrelled about hanging Mabel Debenham, more likely he went to town to spite her.

MR. FIDLER. You are a cynical devil. But I can't deny she deserves what she gets. Fancy her wanting to hang her stable companion.

COLONEL. Well, you know, there's a good deal to be said for Mrs. Lovely's point of view.

MR. FIDLER (*apologetically*). Why, of course, I forgot. You want the girl hung too.

COLONEL (*angrily*). I never said so.

Enter from garden SIR ADOLPHUS and LADY SWETE.

SIR ADOLPHUS (*merry*). Ah, ha! Bookworms, bookworms! Now I know, Mr. Fidler, where you get all those rare and beautiful quotations. (*Beating time with his finger.*)

“Greater than all things two things is,
The one thing is oysters and the other is fizz.”

MR. FIDLER. You haven't got it right.

SIR ADOLPHUS. Ah! my treacherous memory. And you, Colonel, always busy with the scientific side of your profession. Now tell me exactly what you would do if the German Socialists were to descend upon the lawn there from a kite.

COLONEL. I think there is no danger of any Socialist, German or otherwise, doing anything that requires pluck.

SIR ADOLPHUS. Well, you've taken a great weight off my mind.

MR. FIDLER. O, you needn't be afraid of the Germans, Sir Adolphus; it's our own lower classes that's the danger nowadays. The poor ignorant people who don't know how well off they are and think you can become rich by Act of Parliament.

SIR ADOLPHUS. It's some little moral support to have the law on your side.

MR. FIDLER. Not when it's a law that oughtn't to be allowed to be a law.

SIR ADOLPHUS. Now to what statute do you particularly refer?

MR. FIDLER. Sixty-five per cent of what's gone on in the past ten years. How many of them would you, or any gentleman, be prepared to defend?

SIR ADOLPHUS. If I were to tell you my private opinion of the laws of England, Mr. Fidler, the next I might hear of it would be a petition from Parliament for my removal from the Bench.

MR FIDLER. O, what we say here is strictly be-

tween ourselves. Every little bit of fun here I don't repeat in court.

LADY SWETE. By the way, Mr. Fidler, what was that very amusing story you told me last night after dinner ?

MR. FIDLER (*guiltily*). I don't quite recall . . .

LADY SWETE. I mean about Mrs. Lovely.

MR. FIDLER. If I told you anything about Mrs. Lovely I must have heard it from the Colonel here.

COLONEL. My acquaintance with the lady is extremely slight.

LADY SWETE. I believe you're blushing.

COLONEL (*delighted*). Well now, really !

LADY SWETE. So you can tell us all about Mrs. Lovely and Mabel Debenham.

SIR ADOLPHUS. Who on earth is Mabel Debenham ?

LADY SWETE. That little actress person who killed her child.

MR. FIDLER. I can't help laughing when I think of Mrs. Lovely wanting her to be hanged.

SIR ADOLPHUS. My sense of humour has quite deserted me.

LADY SWETE. You're so ridiculously sentimental when there's a woman in the case.

SIR ADOLPHUS (*bitterly*). I stand rebuked.

MR. FIDLER (*to LADY SWETE gallantly*). Ah, I know well what petticoat influence is myself.

COLONEL. I'm sure you wouldn't allow it to affect your judgment.

MR. FIDLER. Not when it's a case of crime—no.

LADY SWETE. Supposing Mrs. Lovely had killed her child.

SIR ADOLPHUS (*indignantly*). How can you talk such . . .

LADY SWETE. O, we can't even discuss Mrs. Lovely before my husband. She's thrown some enchantment over him.

COLONEL (*stroking his moustache*). He's not the first. (*With a sigh.*) Poor Lovely!

SIR ADOLPHUS. Why "poor Lovely"? Was he not an uncommonly lucky fellow to marry her then, as she must have been in the first radiance of youth?

LADY SWETE (*to the COLONEL*). I was nearly twenty-five, you must understand, when Sir Adolphus married me.

COLONEL. Without being unfair to Emily Lovely, I must say Sir Adolphus was the more to be envied.

SIR ADOLPHUS (*smoothly*). I am indeed much to be envied. I often wonder, Colonel, why you envious fellows die old bachelors. . . .

MR. FIDLER. You see, the Colonel's like the fellow in the song: had his heart broken after Covent Garden ball.

SIR ADOLPHUS. Well, you can tell Lady Swete all about it while I take a little more fresh air.

Exit to garden.

COLONEL (*to LADY SWETE*). Do you really mean that Emily Lovely has . . .

LADY SWETE. O, she's quite turned his head.

MR. FIDLER. Now I should have thought that any man could see through her. . . .

LADY SWETE. But you can't deny she's pretty.

MR. FIDLER. Not much to my taste. (*Slyly.*) I'm not speaking for the Colonel.

COLONEL (*loftily*). O, twelve or fifteen years ago.

LADY SWETE. That's too long ago for me to remember.

COLONEL. Besides, you'd never have met . . .

LADY SWETE. Ah, her people were not quite . . . ?

COLONEL. No. Her father was in the Sappers, I think somebody told me. He died in India when she was in her teens. . . .

LADY SWETE. And left nothing, I suppose ?

COLONEL. He left a wife, I think. Certainly a family ; and the story she told Lovely was that she went on the stage to support them.

LADY SWETE. I wonder if that's the story she told Wadey.

COLONEL. It's wonderful what men will believe.

LADY SWETE. Don't you believe it ?

COLONEL (*shrugging his shoulders*). Who in their senses would go on the stage to support a family ?

MR. FIDLER. But I'm told actresses make large fortunes.

COLONEL. One in a thousand. I tell you Emily Lovely was on a par with Mabel Debenham, and she couldn't even support this one child of her own.

LADY SWETE. Was that why she killed it ?

COLONEL (*stiffly*). I'm sure I don't know.

LADY SWETE. But what could the other one have done if she hadn't gone on the stage ?

COLONEL. O, there are always heaps of things for a woman to do.

LADY SWETE. What ?

MR. FIDLER. If she was a good-looking young girl she might have married.

LADY SWETE. But that's what she did as soon as she got the chance.

MR. FIDLER. From what the Colonel tells me, she ought not to have got the chance.

COLONEL. O, I never said that.

MR. FIDLER. Excuse me—you did.

COLONEL (*haughtily*). Do you contradict me?

MR. FIDLER. I don't contradict you, old fellow. We disagree about what you said, that's all.

LADY SWETE (*softly to the COLONEL*). May I know what you said? Will you trust me?

COLONEL. O, really, it was nothing. Lovely may have been an ass, but he wasn't a child. I don't seriously blame her for marrying him.

LADY SWETE. But you don't think she's good enough for Lord Wadebridge?

COLONEL. If you put it to me on my honour, I don't like the idea of her being some day Marchioness of Padstow.

MR. FIDLER. And I'm quite sure that if the Colonel were to tell the Marquess what he told me, he'd put his foot on it at once.

LADY SWETE. I'm afraid that wouldn't help us much . . . though Wadey's very fond of his father.

Enter the MARQUESS, rubbing his hands, from house.

PADSTOW. Did you see Wadey tearing up the avenue—the Wings of Love, eh?

LADY SWETE. Sixty horse-power.

PADSTOW. I like my new car: though I haven't the nerve to drive it myself. . . . Fisherton says he must have done forty-eight miles an hour this side of Hungerford. . . . And to think how proud

I was when I galloped four horses over eighteen miles in an hour and a quarter.

COLONEL. When was that ?

PADSTOW. The year I was married—'65.

MR. FIDLER. The roads are better now than then.

PADSTOW. Everything's better now than then. Even men and women—eh, Rachel ?

LADY SWETE. Men perhaps, not women.

PADSTOW. Men and women. I take both or neither.

LADY SWETE. I'm afraid I don't agree.

MR. FIDLER. You won't find many that will agree to that.

COLONEL. Not among us.

PADSTOW. Then I'll go find Mrs. Lovely ; she'll agree with me.

LADY SWETE. May I go with you ?

PADSTOW. Do you want to talk with Mrs. Lovely too ?

LADY SWETE. I want to talk to you about her.

PADSTOW (*slightly perplexed*). Oh. (*Then lightly.*) The garden will be the best place for that.

Exit with LADY SWETE.

COLONEL. What were you saying to Lady Swete ?

MR. FIDLER. Just what you told me about Mrs. Lovely and that other wench being as like as two pins.

COLONEL (*annoyed*). I never said that.

MR. FIDLER. That's what it comes to.

COLONEL. If I even hinted at such a thing it was in strict confidence.

MR. FIDLER. I told Lady Swete she must regard it as confidential.

COLONEL. By this time she's blabbing it all to the Marquess.

MR. FIDLER. Well, that's what we both want, isn't it ?

COLONEL. I don't follow you.

MR. FIDLER. Anyone can see you don't want her to marry Wadebridge.

COLONEL. What is it to me ?

MR. FIDLER. I'd a notion you wanted to marry her yourself.

COLONEL (*proudly*). I?—Want to marry Emily Lovely !

MR. FIDLER (*unimpressed*). She refused you ?

COLONEL (*with a bitter sneer*). You might as well ask if Mabel Debenham refused me.

Steps are heard, and the BISHOP appears slowly mounting the steps to the terrace. He wears no hat ; his hands, clasped behind his back, hold a book.

COLONEL. Hulloo ! we didn't see you at breakfast.

THE BISHOP. No. I have been walking, walking, walking.

COLONEL. You preferred more rapid exercise in the old days.

THE BISHOP. When you knew me we were both dashing to destruction.

MR. FIDLER. The Colonel's still at it.

THE BISHOP. I grieve to think it.

COLONEL. O, never mind about me. I'll take care of myself.

THE BISHOP (*very depressed*). What more am I doing than taking care of myself ?

COLONEL. We thought yesterday you were offering to take care of your brother.

THE BISHOP. Am I Cain that I should say I am not my brother's keeper?

MR. FIDLER. Does anyone know whether it says anywhere why Cain wasn't hanged?

THE BISHOP. His was a worse punishment: to wander over the face of the earth.

MR. FIDLER. Ah! We had to give that up because the Colonies objected.

THE BISHOP. It is still a punishment that men give themselves.

MR. FIDLER. What men?

THE BISHOP. Men such as I. . . . I have been a wanderer on the face of the earth, and shall be till I die.

COLONEL. But you never killed anyone.

THE BISHOP. When you knew me I was bent upon the killing of my own soul.

COLONEL. O, nonsense, Straight. I remember you perfectly well. You were quite an ordinary sort of man.

THE BISHOP. Hell is full of such ordinary men as I was.

COLONEL (*shrugging his shoulders*). You'll never get me to believe that.

THE BISHOP. Never, in all eternity?

COLONEL (*slightly uncomfortable*). 'Pon my soul, I don't know what the Church of England is coming to!

THE BISHOP. Alas! what, indeed!

MR. FIDLER. If you want to be fanatical, why don't you go over to Rome?

THE BISHOP. Rome has wrecked the purity of the first century. She has been the Capua of the Fathers.

MR. FIDLER. Don't be pulling our legs. Every schoolboy knows that Rome and Capua are different places.

THE BISHOP. Every Christian knows that all places of this vale of tears are one.

COLONEL. Then, begad, there doesn't seem to be much point in wandering over the face of the earth.

MR. FIDLER (*guffawing*). Ha, ha, ha ! The Colonel had you there, Bishop.

THE BISHOP. Who am I, to measure my wits with his ?

COLONEL (*mollified*). Well, you seemed trying to convert me to your way of thinking.

THE BISHOP. To convert you, Colonel, I would rather argue than argue.

MR. FIDLER. I believe if the Church were to confine itself to prayer and ceremonial generally, and leave arguing alone, people in general would have more respect for it.

THE BISHOP. Are the people of England wanting in respect for their Church ?

MR. FIDLER. Well, in some Radical constituencies, I should say yes.

COLONEL. I don't know a single parish where the common people look up to it as they should. Discipline is what they want. I'd make every able-bodied man in England attend service regularly, or get fourteen days.

MR. FIDLER. The worst you could do would be to fine him forty shillings.

THE BISHOP. The worst you could do would be to bar him from the altar for ever.

MR. FIDLER. O, you'd never get the man in the street to understand that.

THE BISHOP. Cannot an Englishman be made to understand as much as an African ?

MR. FIDLER. To tell you the truth, Englishmen—the common, ignorant people, I mean—are beginning to understand a bit too much.

COLONEL. It's all this modern mania for education. It's simply undermining our faith and morals.

THE BISHOP. Yes, it's a curse. And, irony of ironies, they were Churchmen who opened the first schools. They thought they would teach children the way to Heaven : they have taught them the way to Hell.

COLONEL. But, between ourselves, do you really believe in hell ?

THE BISHOP. "This is the Catholic Faith : which except a man believe faithfully, he cannot be saved."

COLONEL. That's not what I call an answer to my question.

THE BISHOP. Then I do not understand your question.

MR. FIDLER. All the Colonel wants to know is whether you fellows who study these things, and presumably know the facts—whether you still think things can be made hot for us after we die ?

THE BISHOP. Whether your souls may be plunged in material fire ?

MR. FIDLER (*nods*). That sort of thing.

THE BISHOP. That seems to me not impossible.

MR. FIDLER. That's what we want to get at. Why do you think it not impossible?

THE BISHOP (*severely, as to children*). Have you ever read your Catechism?

MR. FIDLER. O, come, come. After all, whether we like it or not, progress is progress.

THE BISHOP. Progress is delusion : a shorter way to damnation.

COLONEL. And you dare to say to my face that I am likely to be damned.

THE BISHOP. I dare not say that I am less likely.

COLONEL. Then what the dickens is the good of wasting your days miserably in Africa, with no certainty of anything at the end?

THE BISHOP. The good is, that at the end I shall have no regret, and even though my soul perish it shall lay its good work at the feet of the Lord.

MR. FIDLER. Don't see, myself, much point in giving something for nothing.

THE BISHOP. Nothing? Have we not been given the earth and the fruits thereof?

COLONEL. That was all very well when you plucked the fruit and enjoyed it.

THE BISHOP. I plucked forbidden fruit and repent it in sackcloth and ashes.

COLONEL. You're much too conceited, Straight.

THE BISHOP (*bowing his head*). Even so.

COLONEL. I don't believe you ever did anything I haven't done myself, or Fidler here.

MR. FIDLER (*anxious*). Mind you, I'm not saying that.

THE BISHOP. Perhaps I had better lights.

COLONEL. Just like your cheek. . . . I tell you I don't believe you were worse than me, and I defy you to prove from the Bible that I ever did anything wrong.

THE BISHOP. Before you attempt to understand the Bible you must learn your Catechism.

COLONEL. O, bosh ! You talk to me as if I were a little child.

THE BISHOP. No, Colonel, I do not. I have not for you so much respect.

COLONEL (*enraged*). Say that again and I'll . . .

MR. FIDLER. Come, come. You fellows will never agree. You forget that religion is one thing and practical life another.

THE BISHOP. The only life that is worth living is practical religion.

MR. FIDLER (*diplomatically*). Well, there now, I'd say it was practical horse-breeding ; but we'll agree to differ.

COLONEL (*who has been bottling up his indignation*). May I ask if you respect your brother ?

THE BISHOP. Wadebridge ? I do. He walks in darkness, but he has the heathen virtues. He is charitable, he is honourable.

COLONEL. Well, let me tell you this : if he marries Milly Lovely he may be charitable but he won't be honourable.

THE BISHOP. My brother would be honourable though he took to wife Messalina.

COLONEL. Well, if you're satisfied I am ; only I don't want the Conservative party wrecked by a fool married to a——

MR. FIDLER. I say, I say, this isn't the time to call a spade a spáde.

THE BISHOP. I do not approve of my brother's marrying a widow : but I cannot deny that, humanly speaking, widows have made good wives, and even pious and devoted mothers.

COLONEL. You think she won't be likely to kill her children ?

THE BISHOP (*thrilled*). How can you suggest such a truly devilish act ? Has any woman—any sane woman, any English woman—ever killed her child ?

COLONEL. Well, yes ; the fact is, one of Mrs. Lovely's oldest friends is to be hanged for it this month.

THE BISHOP (*after a pause*). This is incredible.

COLONEL. That's right. Call me a liar. Your cloth protects you. I thought you'd like to know—not that you're interested in women—but out of respect for your brother. Good morning. *Exit.*

THE BISHOP (*to MR. FIDLER*). I never read the papers, but I know that man for a liar. . . .

MR. FIDLER. You go too far, Bishop ; a British officer doesn't tell lies. . . .

THE BISHOP. All men are liars, and the daughters of men.

MR. FIDLER. Well, of course, no man with a head on his shoulders would expect a woman to tell him the truth.

THE BISHOP. No, she would be afraid. Women

live for ever in fear of confessing the truth to men.

MR. FIDLER. Well, when it comes out, it can be a bit nasty. Not that I blame a woman for being a woman any more than I blame a cow for being a cow. Only we must not expect too much.

THE BISHOP. Who was this woman that killed her child ?

MR. FIDLER. I can't for the life of me remember her name, though it was on the tip of my tongue five minutes ago. I'll ring for a paper.

THE BISHOP. No, no. Her name is nothing to me. I would rather not cumber my mind with it. Why did she kill her child ?

MR. FIDLER. I haven't a notion. . . . I hate cruelty worse than anything. . . . I'd like to see her buried alive.

THE BISHOP. But that would be a cruelty worse than hers.

MR. FIDLER. And what about Hell ? Will she be better off there ?

THE BISHOP. Once she has paid the penalty of her crime with the dread sacrifice of death, she may yet find in the infinite mercy of her Creator peace for herself and for her child.

MR. FIDLER. Though she hated it enough to kill it ?

THE BISHOP. Who shall say that even that perverted passion may not be turned to love hereafter. . . . God's ways are not man's ways.

MR. FIDLER. Well, I'm glad, anyhow, that you feel as a matter of decency she's got to be hanged.

THE BISHOP. I have no feeling in the matter. It is justice.

MR. FIDLER. You might explain that to your brother before he lets her off.

THE BISHOP. Impossible. He would never shrink from the most painful duty.

MR. FIDLER. Your brother's a great man in the House or on the platform ; but alone with a pretty woman . . .

THE BISHOP. Do you suggest that he is utterly base ?

MR. FIDLER. O, dear no. . . . But we can't all be saints and live in Africa.

Enter from garden LORD WADEBRIDGE, with a quick, light step—almost a run. He does not notice anyone in the room, but goes straight to the bookshelves, scanning them with eager eyes.

THE BISHOP (*somewhat plaintively, after a glance at MR. FIDLER*). Wadey !

WADEBRIDGE (*turning, surprised, and holding out both hands*). My dear old Austin, I never saw you. (*They grip hands affectionately.*) Nor you, Mr. Fidler. . . . I came in to look for a book.

MR. FIDLER. O, I don't look for civility from any man engaged to a pretty woman : let alone a member of the Cabinet.

WADEBRIDGE. I'm afraid a busy man does find it hard to keep his eyes open.

MR. FIDLER. Just what I was saying to the Bishop.

WADEBRIDGE (*with amused and almost perfectly suppressed contempt*). You were saying to the Bishop ?

MR. FIDLER. What some of us think. . . . That he ought to open your eyes for you.

WADEBRIDGE. And in what direction ?

MR. FIDLER. Well, about women in general, and one woman in particular.

WADEBRIDGE (*slightly impatiently*). What do you mean ?

MR. FIDLER. O, nothing personal—it's no business of mine about the Merry Widow. I shouldn't say anything if you were going to marry the Belle of New York.

WADEBRIDGE (*briskly*). Very liberal of you.

MR. FIDLER. But I do call this flying off to see prisoners at Wandsworth gaol—women prisoners, murderesses, if you please—a perfect scandal and most un-English.

WADEBRIDGE (*taken by surprise*). You take great interest in my movements.

MR. FIDLER. I know my duty as a magistrate.

WADEBRIDGE. Have you any idea what are the duties of the Home Secretary ?

MR. FIDLER. I know that we don't pay him five thousand a year to make himself a nuisance to the police.

WADEBRIDGE. It is not to the point—but you pay me nothing.

MR. FIDLER. I'd rather you took the pay and behaved like a gentleman. We don't want amateurs upsetting the laws.

WADEBRIDGE. You will be interested in my bill for turning the county justices into stipendiaries.

MR. FIDLER. That would be the most revolutionary measure ever conceived.

WADEBRIDGE. I wonder. . . . What do you think, Austin ?

THE BISHOP. Questions of the administration of justice are beyond my range. But I beg you not to yield to any temptation to fly in the face of Justice herself.

WADEBRIDGE. How could I know her if I saw her ?

THE BISHOP. Your conscience, taught by the Christian faith.

WADEBRIDGE. Christians differ. What we Anglicans defend as right continental Christians abhor.

THE BISHOP. Continental Christians are Roman, Greek, or Infidel. Out of our Church you will find a sanction for everything from murder to adultery. But though you may say that a sin is not a sin, the Eternal justice declares that its wages shall be death.

WADEBRIDGE. Theological justice is not in my keeping, Austin. I am concerned with human justice—between man and man, between man and woman, between woman and woman.

THE BISHOP. And between woman and child.

WADEBRIDGE. Yes, between man and woman and child.

MR. FIDLER. The present case has nothing to do with any man.

WADEBRIDGE. I wonder.

Enter MRS. LOVELY from garden.

MRS. LOVELY. Can't you find the book, Wadey ?

WADEBRIDGE. I'm sorry ; I'm afraid I've been lured into a discussion. Mr. Fidler you know.

MRS. LOVELY (*bowing to MR. FIDLER*). Glorious morning, isn't it ?

MR. FIDLER. Lovely morning, Mrs. Lovely ; almost too fine for the birds.

MRS. LOVELY. How can it be too fine for the birds ?

MR. FIDLER. I mean for shooting them.

MRS. LOVELY. Do you country gentlemen never think of anything but what you can kill ?

MR. FIDLER. Well, you see, we don't kill the same things as London ladies do.

WADEBRIDGE (*to MRS. LOVELY as she turns silently from MR. FIDLER*). Have you met my brother Austin ?

MRS. LOVELY (*holding out her hand to Austin*). Of course, last night at dinner.

THE BISHOP (*looking her in the face with his hands still clasping the book behind his back*). That was not the first time.

MRS. LOVELY (*innocently*). Have we met before ? (*Shaking her head.*) Where ?

THE BISHOP (*with a side glance at MR. FIDLER, who pretends to be lost in the map*). If this gentleman will leave us, I will tell you.

MR. FIDLER (*surprised*). What me ? But I'm on your side, Bishop ?

THE BISHOP (*coldly*). Thank you—I have God on my side.

MR. FIDLER (*huffed*). O, very well. . . . Please yourself. (*To WADEBRIDGE.*) If what the Bishop

says is a bit disagreeable to you as a man, I hope you'll remember your duty to your party.

Exit to house.

THE BISHOP. Now I will speak.

WADEBRIDGE (*to MRS. LOVELY*). Do you wish to hear what he has to say ?

MRS. LOVELY (*in a low voice, but very distinctly*). No, I do not wish to hear it : I think I know what it is. . . .

THE BISHOP. Then will you not leave us ? . . . I shall have no pleasure in your pain.

MRS. LOVELY (*fiercely*). Are you sure of that ?

WADEBRIDGE (*gently*). You must not wrong my brother, Emily ; he will not of malice hurt you.

MRS. LOVELY. I am past hurting, Wadey, by anyone in the world but you.

THE BISHOP. Then hear me if you dare. (*Flinging out a denouncing arm towards her while he turns solemnly to his brother.*) This woman is a harlot !

WADEBRIDGE (*turning on him passionately*). Austin, such a word here !

MRS. LOVELY. Women are not terrified by words, dear. Let him say what he will. If only he believes it—if only he has trained himself to believe it.

THE BISHOP. I am not your judge, but I bring evidence against you.

MRS. LOVELY. What evidence ?

THE BISHOP. I can prove you to have kept the company of profligates.

WADEBRIDGE. Is there anyone in this house that has not kept the company of profligates ?

THE BISHOP. It is not for me to say. At least, the women of our blood are pure women.

MRS. LOVELY. And you tell me I am not ?

THE BISHOP. I say nothing of your being a widow, but I say that a woman who keeps the company of loose women has no right to seek to enter among good.

MRS. LOVELY. What loose woman's company did I ever of my own free choice keep ?

THE BISHOP. One Mabel Debenham's.

MRS. LOVELY (*for the first time angry*). You call my friend Mabel Debenham a loose woman ?

THE BISHOP. I do. I know she was.

MRS. LOVELY (*as excited as he*). It's a lie.

THE BISHOP. I can prove it. (*Thumps his book to emphasise his words.*)

WADEBRIDGE. How can anyone prove a thing like that ?

THE BISHOP. Since you force me to say it—in the days of my vanity she was my own mistress.

MRS. LOVELY (*recoiling from him*). I never knew it. (*A light breaking in upon her.*) Then it was you, my Wadey's brother, that ruined Mabel's life.

THE BISHOP (*almost vindictively*). Not so !—It was she who ruined mine.

WADEBRIDGE. I did not know that you regarded yours as a ruined life.

THE BISHOP (*slightly shamefaced*). I spoke as a man, not as a priest. . . . I do not expect this woman to understand me, Wadey ; but I do expect you. I appeal to you, Wadey, as between man and man, as between brother and brother, to listen to

me and take warning by me. I have told you one terrible truth about myself and this poor wanton girl Debenham. Let me tell you the whole truth.

WADEBRIDGE. Have you not told us quite enough?

THE BISHOP. No. In justice to me you must hear me out. If I wronged this girl, it was through the folly of passion, not of vice. I was never a vicious man, Wadey ; never a cruel man. . . .

WADEBRIDGE. Don't plead your cause to me : state it if you want to.

THE BISHOP. You make things hard for me, but I am not afraid. The facts are these : although she had given herself to me, I offered her marriage—can't you understand, both of you, that I loved that woman far more than myself ?

MRS. LOVELY (*coldly yet doubtfully*). I knew that you offered her marriage ; she told me she accepted . . . and what then ?

THE BISHOP. Then she betrayed me with another.

A moment's pause.

WADEBRIDGE (*to MRS. LOVELY*). Can there be anything in this ?

MRS. LOVELY (*humbly*). Your brother has proved that he knew Mabel better than I. Perhaps he can also prove this.

THE BISHOP (*in bitter triumph*). I can. Alas ! I have spoken within the hour and in this very room with the partner of her crime.

WADEBRIDGE (*astounded*). With . . . ?

THE BISHOP. With Colonel Gower.

MRS. LOVELY (*turning on him*). Who told you of that ?

THE BISHOP. He did.

WADEBRIDGE. He did ?

THE BISHOP. Yes. With his accursed worldly wisdom he said that he did it to save me, his friend, from a foolish marriage. And in this room to-day he asked me to say that hereafter there was no Hell for him who had made my life on earth a Hell for me.

MRS. LOVELY (*very quietly, as she rises and goes towards window*). So you have to thank Colonel Gower for turning you from a wastrel into a saint. It was jealousy of poor Mabel that pointed you the way to Heaven.

THE BISHOP. Yes, yes ; taunt me for my human imperfections. I have no defence ; but can you prove to me that what he said was not true ?

MRS. LOVELY. No, I cannot prove it. And it may comfort you to know that Colonel Gower said the same thing to my husband about me. I cannot prove that was not true. Captain Lovely said he did not believe it, but perhaps your brother may.

Exit to garden.

WADEBRIDGE (*hastening after her*). Emily !

THE BISHOP (*intercepting him with a half-fanatical gesture*). Do not follow that woman ; her lure leads down to death.

WADEBRIDGE (*hesitates, turns back into room, takes his pipe mechanically from his pocket, looks at it and says in a dangerous voice*). If you had your way, Austin, it would lead to her death.

Puts the pipe in his mouth.

THE BISHOP. I do not deny it. I say boldly that

it were well all such women were driven to the stake and burnt.

WADEBRIDGE (*biting his pipe*). What do you mean by such women ?

THE BISHOP. Such women as this, who would dishonour you as Mabel Debenham dishonoured me . . . and as this wretched murderess of her own child, whom you, led away by I know not what depraved and desperate counsellors, are bent on saving that she may be lost.

WADEBRIDGE. What do you know of this woman whom you reproach me with trying to save ?

THE BISHOP. I know nothing, I wish to know nothing. It is enough for me that she has committed the worst of all crimes but that of the unpardonable sin. . . O let that not be your sin.

WADEBRIDGE (*softly yet distinctly*). You offer me your spiritual guidance, Austin. Tell me, might not one kill even for a good intention ?

THE BISHOP. The law kills only with a good intention. And none may kill without the name of the law.

WADEBRIDGE. Not even with the best intention ?

THE BISHOP. Certainly not. (*Pointing to his book.*) Here is a convincing argument from what I was reading this morning, *The Recollections of a Scottish Lawyer*, Cockburn, who, as a young man, defended that arch-murderer Burke—you know Burke and Hare, the Edinburgh resurrection men.

WADEBRIDGE (*nodding*). The case is in my mind.

THE BISHOP. Well, put aside the Christian faith,

and was there ever a nobler motive for any action than led this man Burke to crime? Did he not seek the advancement of science, of the healing arts—nay, may not his crimes have been of unspeakable value to suffering humanity? Do not his actions seem almost as justifiable as those of any vivisectionist to-day?

WADEBRIDGE. You almost make me think so.

THE BISHOP. Yet will you deny that you would have sent him with a light heart to the gallows?

WADEBRIDGE (*putting away his pipe, reflectively*). I might not have had the courage to save him from the gallows, but willingly I would not have sent him there.

THE BISHOP. What! Can you deny that this man was, in fact, a sanguinary, heartless, and hideous scoundrel—rather a demon than a man?

WADEBRIDGE. I deny it absolutely.

THE BISHOP. O, if you can deny that!

Pitches the book on the table.

WADEBRIDGE (*taking up the book*). This is the very book I came in for. Let me read you this hard-headed Scotch advocate's view of Burke: "Except that he murdered, Burke was a sensible and what might be called a respectable man; not at all ferocious in his general manner; sober, correct in all his other habits, and kind to his relations." Was he so different from us, Austin?

THE BISHOP (*indignantly*). I have been a sinful man, but never was I a criminal. I thank Heaven that I am not as this man.

WADEBRIDGE. Perhaps not. (*Reads on.*) "Though

not regularly married, Helen MacDougal was his wife, and when the jury came in with the verdict convicting him but acquitting her, his remark was : ' Well, thank God you're safe ! ' ”

THE BISHOP. That was blasphemy.

WADEBRIDGE. You would not thank God if I told you that this girl, condemned for killing her child, was safe ?

THE BISHOP (*passionately*). Once for all, No. As a priest I say to you that the Judge who sentenced this woman for her crime spoke in my name and in the name of every man, woman, and child within the Christian community, and I say to you that if you stand between this woman and the punishment of her crime, you must share with her the guilt of it.

WADEBRIDGE (*putting down the book*). It is not for me to stand between her crime and its punishment.

THE BISHOP (*gratified*). Ah !

WADEBRIDGE. Nor for me to stand between her and you.

THE BISHOP (*mystified*). And me ?

WADEBRIDGE. The woman condemned to death in your name, as you say, was Mabel Debenham.

THE BISHOP (*in a strangled voice*). Mabel Debenham ! . . . killed her child. . . . What child ?

WADEBRIDGE. As I believe, your child.

THE BISHOP (*almost screaming*). My child !

WADEBRIDGE (*producing an envelope*). Judge for yourself. There is the photograph of mother and child taken a month ago.

THE BISHOP (*glaring at it*). Mabel and . . . taken

a month ago . . . my child, and she had the heart to kill it !

WADEBRIDGE. As you had the heart to kill her.

THE BISHOP. To . . . No, no. (*Mastering himself.*) I spoke in good faith, Wadey. I spoke in good faith . . . and I am not afraid. (*Going towards him pitifully.*) Take me to her, Wadey ; take me to her. . . . I will be with her at the end.

WADEBRIDGE. At the end she was alone. She is dead.

THE BISHOP (*almost happy*). Dead. She too ?

WADEBRIDGE. She fainted as judgment was pronounced and was carried to the cells.

THE BISHOP. To the cells ! . . .

WADEBRIDGE. And never recovered consciousness.

THE BISHOP. And never recovered consciousness ? Let me think. She is dead, the child is dead. . . . I acted in good faith all through. . . . Yet she and the child are at peace, while I—I—— (*Wildly.*) Oh, God, if I could only go to her ; if only I could go to her and say . . .

WADEBRIDGE (*in a quiet, terrible voice*). You forget that all you have to say to her was said by the Judge, when he condemned her to be hanged in your name, and for your crime.

THE BISHOP (*in agony*). What do you say ?

WADEBRIDGE. Your words : the last she heard.

THE BISHOP (*flinging himself abjectly at his brother's feet*). Mercy ! mercy !

ACT III

In the grounds about midday. The COLONEL sits reading the "Financial News" and smoking. Enter MAY, looking up in the sky, with shaded eyes. The COLONEL, evidently expecting someone else, regards her with marked disapproval.

MAY. Please, Colonel Gower, have you seen a baby biplane ?

COLONEL. No, Miss Fisherton, never.

MAY. Nor heard one ?

COLONEL (*with a deliberate intent to snub*). It's hardly the sort of thing I should care to listen to.

MAY. O, what rot ! (*To MR. FIDLER, who enters.*) Please, Mr. Fidler, have you seen a little biplane ?

MR. FIDLER (*chuckling*). I've seen something better than that, Miss Fisherton.

MAY (*calmly*). Nothing could be better than my little biplane.

Exit, still gazing skywards. MR. FIDLER, catching sight of the COLONEL, laughs.

COLONEL. Hulloo ! What's up ?

MR. FIDLER. Didn't you see the fun ?

COLONEL. What fun ?

MR. FIDLER. The Merry Widow's run down the avenue as if she had the police behind her. My belief is she's bolted.

COLONEL (*with affected nonchalance*). She had no business to poke her nose in here among decent people.

MR. FIDLER. But wasn't she received by her first husband's people?

COLONEL. O, dear, no—at least not after he was killed and I told them the truth about her.

MR. FIDLER. Look here, you might tell a fellow: what exactly did she do?

COLONEL. You really mustn't ask me. As a man of the world you ought to feel that. It isn't as if you were going to marry her, and I thought it my duty . . .

MR. FIDLER. O, I wouldn't marry her if she offered me the earth: I don't say that a Saturday to Monday . . . But there, it's not for me to tell you.

COLONEL. Mind you, I say nothing.

MR. FIDLER. I wonder where the strait-laced Wadey met her.

COLONEL. O, the City Temple or Tottenham Court Road.

Enter the VICAR.

MR. FIDLER (*to the VICAR*). Hulloo! Have you seen the Merry Widow?

THE VICAR (*innocently*). I have heard of it—Lady Fisherton was so good as to bid me to luncheon. (*To the COLONEL.*) Can you tell me is the Bishop better?

COLONEL. Austin? O, he's in great form, eh, Mr. Fidler?

MR. FIDLER (*overcome by his sense of humour*). He's preaching a sermon in the library.

THE VICAR (*smiling gently*). I'll go there; it will do me good.

MR. FIDLER. Give you an appetite for luncheon.

THE VICAR. I have that always, I am afraid. It will give me an appetite for work.

COLONEL. Slack about work, eh? are you? Letting things slide, eh?

THE VICAR. Well, I hope not so bad as that—but here in the country we are apt, perhaps, to take things too much for granted.

MR. FIDLER. But what good will a madman like that do you?

THE VICAR (*reprovingly*). The term is harsh and indefensible.

COLONEL (*coming to MR. FIDLER'S rescue*). But he is mad, you know. I know it for a fact. He told me this morning I was going to be damned.

MR. FIDLER (*to VICAR*). What do you think of that?

THE VICAR. What, indeed!

MR. FIDLER. But you can't believe in damnation.

THE VICAR. Aquinas says of far better men than I, "Si moriantur in peccato mortali, in æternum punientur."

COLONEL. But what has Aquinas to do with you?

THE VICAR. He was the greatest of our theologians.

COLONEL. Why, I thought he was a damned Italian.

MR. FIDLER. O, no! (*glad to know something the COLONEL doesn't.*) Archbishop of Canterbury, beheaded by Henry the Eighth.

COLONEL. Well, if he had the impertinence to say that to the King, all I say is: serve him right. (*Sternly to the VICAR.*) And you say you believe it?

THE VICAR (*gently*). No, I do not. When I see that man has so little mercy, I must think God all merciful, or utterly despair.

MR. FIDLER. O, that's liver. I don't want my mercy in bucketfuls, but just a reasonable attitude to the facts of life. I don't pretend to be a good man—far from it; but I'm sure I've never done anything seriously wrong. (*To the COLONEL.*) Did you ever do anything wrong?

COLONEL. Never. . . . I'm sure I should remember it if I had.

THE VICAR. I have done so much wrong that I cannot sleep at night.

MR. FIDLER (*inattentively*). Didn't sleep last night, didn't you?

THE VICAR. All last night I lay wondering by what grace I had escaped the gallows. (*Turning to them innocently.*) The Bishop moved me. I am going to ask his prayers for that poor girl we spoke of yesterday.

COLONEL. Mabel Debenham? A capital idea.

THE VICAR. You think so? Perhaps he would even go to see her.

COLONEL. Here he comes. (*Exchanging a mischievous glance with MR. FIDLER.*) You'd better ask him.

Enter the BISHOP, walking with a rapid step.

THE VICAR. My lord.

THE BISHOP (*sharply but courteously*). Sir!

THE VICAR. Briefly, my lord. There is a poor girl in prison, Mabel Debenham.

THE BISHOP. She is not in prison. She is in heaven. We are in prison. Excuse me. *Passes on.*

COLONEL (*to the VICAR*). Now is he mad or not?

THE VICAR. How do we know he has not divine insight?

COLONEL. You don't mean to say you're a spiritualist?

THE VICAR. That is what I strive to be. *Exit.*

COLONEL. You'd think some mad dog must have bitten the Church of England.

MR. FIDLER. Some of them certainly seem to forget what they're paid for. . . . I wonder where's he off to in such a hurry.

COLONEL. I hope he's not going to heaven to meet Mabel Debenham.

MR. FIDLER (*with slight anxiety*). I say, he's not as mad as that. . . . Besides, she hasn't started yet.

COLONEL. You never know what he'll do. He might try to get her off.

MR. FIDLER (*magnanimous*). Dash it all! I don't mind if he does. Do you really want her hanged?

COLONEL (*shrugging his shoulders*). I don't care sixpence one way or the other. It's only the principle of the thing.

MR. FIDLER. That's it. I know. The thin end of the wedge. If we let this girl off to-day we'll have a burglar that's shot a policeman begging off to-morrow, and a poacher that's bludgeoned a game-keeper the day after that. In the end neither you nor me will be safe.

COLONEL. I don't consider my safety. What I object to is this slobbering, false sentiment about women. Swete tells me there were only three hanged last year. In my opinion the proper place for a woman is a harem. There she'd be out of mischief.

MR. FIDLER. I quite agree ; but, of course, if I say that to Mrs. Fidler she goes on as if I'd insulted her.

COLONEL (*patronisingly*). Thank the Lord I'm a bachelor.

MR. FIDLER (*resentfully*). I suppose the ladies had nothing to do with it ?

COLONEL (*huffily*). Mind your own business, Fidler.

MR. FIDLER (*deliberately*). I wonder if this poor child was at all like its father.

COLONEL (*fiercely*). Do you suggest that the child was mine ?

MR. FIDLER. Well, that would account for her wanting to be rid of it.

COLONEL (*stormily*). Then you positively do suggest . . .

MR. FIDLER. O, no, I don't. I haven't a hap'orth of doubt that Mabel Debenham turned up her nose at you—the same as Mrs. Lovely.

COLONEL (*furiously*). If I had a horsewhip I'd lay it across your back.

MR. FIDLER. You haven't a horsewhip, so what's the use of talking.

Turns away, the COLONEL follows and aims a blow at the back of his head. MR. FIDLER, turning swiftly, avoids it.

MR. FIDLER. Is that the way you used to chase De Wet ?
The MARQUESS enters at back.

COLONEL. Damn your impertinence !

MARQUESS (*with a polite cough*). Gentlemen, your conversation is so very animated !

MR. FIDLER (*putting his hands in his pockets*). Only a harmless little bit of fun, my lord.

COLONEL. This man has insulted me.

MR. FIDLER. Just tell the Marquess what I said.

COLONEL. It was the way you said it.

MARQUESS. Ah, I see the difficulty. But, of course, Mr. Fidler never meant it in that way.

MR. FIDLER. Not I, my lord. It's all the Colonel's fancy.

MARQUESS. Well, then that's settled.

MR. FIDLER (*slightly advancing his hand*). I bear no malice.

COLONEL. I am the offended party.

MR. FIDLER. O, come. I never attacked you from behind.

COLONEL. You hear that, my lord.

MARQUESS. I saw for myself what occurred. You put out your hand for Mr. Fidler to shake and he misunderstood your intention.

MR. FIDLER. Let's say that's it.

Takes the COLONEL's hand.

COLONEL. O, all right. *Shakes hands sulkily.*

MARQUESS. Has anyone seen Mrs. Lovely ?

MR. FIDLER. I saw her go down the avenue.

MARQUESS (*troubled*). Down the avenue ! When ?

MR. FIDLER. It might be twenty minutes ago. I'll show you the way she went.

MARQUESS. Do.

He and MR. FIDLER hurry off together. The COLONEL resumes his study of the "Financial News," which he smacks angrily with his clenched fist. Enter LADY SWETE hastily. She looks round.

LADY SWETE. O, Colonel!

COLONEL (*jumping up, all smiles*). Lady Swete!

LADY SWETE. Didn't the Marquess pass somewhere here?

COLONEL. He's gone down the avenue with Mr. Fidler.

LADY SWETE. O, with Mr. Fidler. . . . I'm tired—let me sit down here beside you.

COLONEL (*in his most winning tones*). Do; and let us be happy a little while together.

LADY SWETE. O, I can't be happy. . . . Tell me some more about Mrs. Lovely.

COLONEL. There, you mustn't trouble about that. I was never in love with her.

LADY SWETE. I'm sure you were, if you're not now.

COLONEL. What makes you imagine that?

LADY SWETE. O, everyone's in love with her. Lord Padstow is as crazy as my husband.

COLONEL. Well, you needn't trouble about her any more, for she's gone; and it's my belief she won't come back.

LADY SWETE. Gone? But I saw her maid just now come out of her room.

COLONEL. I suppose she left her to pack.

LADY SWETE. You think she's really gone?

COLONEL. Fidler saw her go. He and the Marquess are looking for her now.

LADY SWETE (*starting up*). The Marquess is looking for her ! He'll bring her back.

COLONEL. She'll be afraid to come back. The Bishop has told Wadebridge everything about her.

LADY SWETE. But what was there to tell ?

COLONEL. I thought you guessed.

LADY SWETE. Then she was your friend ?

COLONEL. There wouldn't be anything in that.

LADY SWETE (*clapping her hands*). Run and find the Marquess.

COLONEL (*offended*). I run ! I'm not a boy.

LADY SWETE. O, I'm sure you can run. (*Coaxingly.*) You look so athletic.

COLONEL (*mollified*). And what is to be my prize ?

LADY SWETE. Anything in the world you like if only we can prevent him bringing that woman back.

COLONEL. But what am I to say to him ? That you want him ?

LADY SWETE. No, not that. Say my sister wants him. Invent something, it doesn't matter what.

COLONEL (*indignantly*). You want me to tell a lie.

LADY SWETE. That's it. I'm sure you're splendid at telling lies.

COLONEL (*taking her by the arms in lordly style*). If you were a man I'd kill you for saying that. As you're a woman I suppose I can only kiss you.

LADY SWETE (*submitting with complete indifference*). Anything, if you'll only be quick about it.

COLONEL (*splendidly*). If I could teach you what it is to be loved by a real man. . . .

LADY SWETE. Don't talk. . . .

ROPE ENOUGH

Sees WADEBRIDGE enter and smiles at him over the COLONEL'S shoulder. He turns away.

COLONEL. You devil! (*Kisses her.*) You cold devil. *Kisses her again.*

LADY SWETE. Wadey may not mind your kissing me, but he won't let you call me names.

COLONEL (*wheeling round and seeing WADEBRIDGE'S back*). He saw nothing.

LADY SWETE (*laughing in his face*). There, run and keep your promise, Ostrich.

COLONEL. Ostrich!

LADY SWETE. If you're not an ostrich, fly!

She claps her hands at him and he hurries off towards the avenue.

LADY SWETE (*when the COLONEL is out of earshot*). Wadey!

WADEBRIDGE (*looking up*). Did you call me, Rachel?

LADY SWETE. I hope you enjoyed what you saw.

WADEBRIDGE. I'm not in the mood for enjoying anything.

LADY SWETE (*pleased*). So you are a little jealous.

WADEBRIDGE. Is that what you would call it?

LADY SWETE. Confess you didn't like to see him kiss me.

WADEBRIDGE. I'm glad it was I and not Swete.

LADY SWETE. O, that woman has cut me out with Dollie too. . . . And yet, you know, she's older than I.

WADEBRIDGE (*interested*). Is she, really?

LADY SWETE. O, you're blind.

WADEBRIDGE. So the Colonel thinks.

LADY SWETE (*smelling her hands, with a pout*). What abominably strong soap he uses.

WADEBRIDGE. He wants it.

LADY SWETE. All men want plenty of washing.

WADEBRIDGE. They'll not trouble about that while there are women like you to accept them as they are.

LADY SWETE (*with curled lip*). My passion for the Colonel is not incurable.

WADEBRIDGE. You have about as much passion as your husband's wig.

LADY SWETE. You mean that not being an actress I've never flattered you by showing it.

WADEBRIDGE. My dear Rachel, I know you far too well to pay the slightest attention to anything you say.

LADY SWETE. I wish I'd known you well enough to pay no attention to what you said.

WADEBRIDGE. When?

LADY SWETE. When you asked me to marry you.

WADEBRIDGE. Seven years ago . . . and you refused me.

LADY SWETE. I didn't refuse you, but you insisted on standing for the County Council, though I begged you not.

WADEBRIDGE. And so you married poor Swete.

LADY SWETE. He wouldn't be on the Bench if I hadn't married him.

WADEBRIDGE. And I shouldn't be at the Home Office if you'd married me.

LADY SWETE. Yes, you would. I wanted you to go into Parliament.

WADEBRIDGE. It was only on the County Council I learned it was possible to do any good there.

LADY SWETE. I suppose it was among that rabble you met her ?

WADEBRIDGE (*nodding*). Education Committee.

LADY SWETE. Why, the woman's a perfect Becky Sharp.

WADEBRIDGE (*calmly*). I've not noticed it.

LADY SWETE. Not that she was the woman to do all sorts of things with all sorts of men ?

WADEBRIDGE. You ask me whether I think she would let Colonel Gower kiss her ?

LADY SWETE (*furiously*). You don't compare me with her !

WADEBRIDGE (*catching her tone*). No more than I compare Colonel Gower with that decent man your husband.

LADY SWETE (*after she has looked him a moment in the face breaks off with a little laugh*). I like you best when you're angry, Wadey. If I'd married you I'd have made you angry every day.

WADEBRIDGE (*not unkindly*). You flatter yourself

LADY SWETE. I'm not flattering anyone now, Wadey. I'm thinking what an escape we both had.

WADEBRIDGE. You had, indeed, Rachel. I'm the stodgiest person under the sun.

LADY SWETE (*with a sudden revulsion of feeling*). I could kill her when I think she's got you, Wadey.

WADEBRIDGE. Nonsense ; you'd have killed me if you'd married me.

LADY SWETE. But I could have loved you, Wadey I can't love my husband.

WADEBRIDGE. And your children, Rachel?

LADY SWETE. They love their father more than they do me.

WADEBRIDGE. Surely that must be your fault.

LADY SWETE. I don't know. Your children will love you more than . . . Why do you look at me like that?

WADEBRIDGE. I shall never be a father.

LADY SWETE (*with genuine sympathy*). O, poor Wadey! But how can you think . . .

WADEBRIDGE. Do you know anyone in the world who is perfectly happy?

LADY SWETE. Yes. . . . Your father.

WADEBRIDGE. He's dying of cancer, Rachel.

Enter PADSTOW, hurried and anxious, followed by MR. FIDLER.

PADSTOW (*to WADEBRIDGE*). Ah, there you are! What's this about Austin?

WADEBRIDGE (*mystified*). About Austin?

PADSTOW (*a little impatiently*). Yes. The Colonel told me you wanted to speak to me about something Austin told you.

WADEBRIDGE. The Colonel said that?

MR. FIDLER. Yes, and I told the Marquess I thought it was about something the Bishop said in that long talk you had in the library.

WADEBRIDGE. Thank you, Mr. Fidler. When I want my father I go to him. I have not the impertinence to send for him.

PADSTOW (*deprecatingly*). After all, you're a great man now, and I'm only a private person.

MR. FIDLER. And we can't help it if someone puts the Colonel up to telling lies.

LADY SWETE. He needn't have told a stupid one like that.

MR. FIDLER. If you want the Colonel to tell lies that anyone could believe you'd better give him lessons, Lady Swete.

LADY SWETE. The lies you men tell have no interest for me.

MR. FIDLER. Not when they're about other women?

LADY SWETE. If you mean the Colonel's ridiculous scandals about Mrs. Lovely, I don't believe a word of them.

PADSTOW (*sharply*). What's this about Mrs. Lovely? (*Grasping his cane nervously*.) Has Gower dared . . .? (*To WADEBRIDGE*.) Why has she left the house?

WADEBRIDGE (*dumbfounded*). Left the house! Emily?

PADSTOW. Mr. Fidler saw her going down the avenue half an hour ago, and no one has seen her since.

WADEBRIDGE (*unnerved*). They told me she'd gone to her room. I thought she was lying down. . . . Where's Gower?

PADSTOW. Gone on to the lodge to inquire there.

MR. FIDLER. I wanted to go, but he said he'd be quicker by himself.

WADEBRIDGE (*with a snap of the jaw*). He'll want to be quick if . . . *Exit.*

PADSTOW. As a magistrate, Mr. Fidler, isn't it

your duty to see that the Home Secretary keeps the peace?

MR. FIDLER (*taking the hint*). If I thought the Colonel would stand up to him . . . *Strolls off.*

PADSTOW (*turning on LADY SWETE as if she were a naughty child*). I suppose this is some of your mischief-making?

LADY SWETE (*submissively*). Some of it.

PADSTOW. Well, it's not pretty of you, Rachel.

LADY SWETE. You mustn't expect pretty things of me any more.

PADSTOW. I don't. Some years ago it was different. I was sorry then you wouldn't marry Wadey.

LADY SWETE. But I would. It was his fault, not mine. He wouldn't gratify me in the smallest thing.

PADSTOW. What did he refuse you—toffee or lollipops? What does your husband refuse you, yet you don't seem too well satisfied with him?

LADY SWETE. O, yes, I am really. But I can't love him as I loved Wadey. And I can't bear Wadey to marry out of his own class.

PADSTOW. What business is it of yours? And what class are you?

LADY SWETE. At least, I don't belong to the society of Mabel Debenham.

PADSTOW (*severely*). Speak respectfully of that poor woman.

LADY SWETE (*astonished*). The woman who killed her child?

PADSTOW (*hoarsely*). My grandchild.

LADY SWETE (*after an instant's astonishment*). Austin . . . ?

PADSTOW. Yes. Our saintly Austin deserted her and her child, and when she was no longer able to support it by her labour she killed it.

LADY SWETE. O, but why did she do that? Wadey's nephew. If she'd brought it even to me . . .

PADSTOW (*with deep bitterness*). I suppose she'd learnt enough of Austin's religion to believe it would be better off in Heaven.

LADY SWETE (*awed*). What will they do with her?

PADSTOW. When she killed her child she herself was dying. She's dead. They'll bury her in Wandsworth prison yard. Even Wadey can't save her from that. The last insolence offered her by our class.

LADY SWETE (*taking his hand*). I'm sorry for anything I've done to vex you.

PADSTOW. There, I'm too old to be vexed. But for your own and your husband's sake, above all, for your children's sake, it's time you gave up playing the spoiled child.

Enter LORD WADEBRIDGE *and* MR. FIDLER.

WADEBRIDGE. She hasn't been seen at the Lodge, and they think she can't have gone that way.

MR. FIDLER. And the Colonel never went near the Lodge. He's in the gun-room looking at a new contrivance he's going to try to-morrow.

LADY SWETE. Perhaps she turned back to the house. I'll run and see—if you wish me to, Wadey.

WADEBRIDGE (*gratefully*). Please do, Rachel.

As she is going, enter SIR ADOLPHUS and MRS. LOVELY. She looks extremely distressed, and leans on his arm as he prattles to her.

SIR ADOLPHUS. And now I think that's quite enough walking for either of us. . . .

LADY SWETE (*to MRS. LOVELY, interrupting her husband*). I was coming to look for you.

MRS. LOVELY (*suspecting a challenge*). You wanted me ?

SIR ADOLPHUS. I've been explaining to Mrs. Lovely that everyone wants her.

LADY SWETE. I wanted to tell you how sorry I am that I didn't understand you were a friend of poor Mabel Debenham's.

MR. FIDLER (*incontinently*). Gosh !

MRS. LOVELY (*interested*). Did you know her ?

LADY SWETE. She was the friend of a very great friend.

MRS. LOVELY (*bristling*). Not Colonel Gower ?

LADY SWETE (*coldly*). Colonel Gower is the merest acquaintance.

MRS. LOVELY (*looking at her very hard*). Lord Austin ?

LADY SWETE (*firmly*). I had no reason to suppose that they were friends.

MRS. LOVELY (*less fixedly*). Can you tell me where Mabel is now ?

LADY SWETE (*gently*). I am sorry to have to say that she is dead.

MRS. LOVELY (*thrown off her guard*). O, poor Mabel. (*Anxiously*.) Where did she die ? When ?

LADY SWETE (*in a perfectly natural tone*). I can't

tell you precisely how long ago, but it was somewhere in the South. (*Casts an appealing side glance at the MARQUESS, who nods.*)

MRS. LOVELY. In the South! She longed always to go to the South, but when I asked her to join me in Italy she never answered the letter.

PADSTOW. When was that?

MRS. LOVELY. Ten years ago.

PADSTOW. Perhaps the letter never reached her.

LADY SWETE. When did you hear from her?

MRS. LOVELY. I never had any letter after I was married but one at Cape Town, in which she said she was as wretched as I was happy.

PADSTOW (*under his breath*). Poor thing, poor thing!

MRS. LOVELY (*with a wistful smile*). I suppose I did not sufficiently realise my happiness. My husband, who was as generous as he was brave, wrote to her—for both of us—that, whatever troubled her, she would always be welcome in our house. And then he was shot, and I never heard any more of Mabel until now . . . (*Correcting herself in a bitter tone.*) Until an hour ago.

PADSTOW (*painfully repeating the phrase*). Until an hour ago?

LADY SWETE (*taking MRS. LOVELY'S hand entreatingly*). Emily! Don't make us all unhappy.

MRS. LOVELY (*relentlessly*). Can you tell me whether Mabel ever found happiness?

LADY SWETE (*seizing her chance*). Yes, she was not unhappy. She had a child of whom she was passionately fond.

MRS. LOVELY (*with a complete change of voice*). O, I am so glad. . . . Do you know where the child is?

LADY SWETE (*gently*). I believe she lost it, and never got over the shock.

MRS. LOVELY (*in a subdued tone*). At least she had it. (*Threatening to break down.*) I'm so glad, for her sake—she was the only friend I ever had.

PADSTOW. Well now, my dear, you'll have plenty; there's Lady Fisherton and Rachel here, and . . .

LADY SWETE. I'm not very valuable, but I'll do my best, Emily.

MR. FIDLER (*to the company generally*). This'll interest the Colonel. *Exit.*

PADSTOW (*seeing that MRS. LOVELY still holds nervously aloof from his son*). Here, dear; you just take a turn in the garden with Wadey. . . . No, don't talk—let him do the talking if any is wanted.

WADEBRIDGE (*offering her his arm*). You won't treat me more distantly than Sir Adolphus?

She takes his arm silently and they go off.

SIR ADOLPHUS (*to make conversation while they are within earshot*). It's very sad to die young.

PADSTOW. It's not especially good fun when you're old—where did you find her?

SIR ADOLPHUS. Among the sycamore trees near the farm gate. She was lying on the grass crying, and I had to pretend I thought she was looking for mushrooms.

PADSTOW. Did you understand what had happened?

SIR ADOLPHUS (*rather wearily*). I think, perhaps, Rachel can tell you more than I.

LADY SWETE. There's nothing more to tell. (*Putting her hand on her husband's arm.*) It was lucky you met her, Dollie; you're so nice with every woman, even me.

SIR ADOLPHUS (*rather more cheerfully*). Sentimental, eh?

LADY SWETE. It's lucky for me that you are sentimental, though I do laugh at you sometimes.

SIR ADOLPHUS. To be laughed at! That's all a Judge of the High Court wants. You can bribe even Doncaster that way.

PADSTOW. Please, Adolphus, don't let us hear that person's name again.

Exit. SIR ADOLPHUS *looks at his wife astonished.*

She puts her finger to her lips.

SIR ADOLPHUS. What has happened?

LADY SWETE. I don't quite know. The least said the better. Dollie, Colonel Gower kissed me this morning.

SIR ADOLPHUS (*with unwonted stolidity*). Well, if it amuses you to let him make a fool of himself that's his trouble, not mine.

LADY SWETE. You are good, Dollie, truly generous.

SIR ADOLPHUS (*a little bitterly*). In giving away what I haven't got.

LADY SWETE. Dollie, ours was not a romantic marriage. . . .

SIR ADOLPHUS. Well, of course, I was a hobbledehoy of five-and-forty.

LADY SWETE. All the same, Dollie, if we were

both free to-day and you asked me to marry you. . . . But perhaps you wouldn't.

SIR ADOLPHUS (*gently taking her arm*). My dear Rachel, there are mighty few romantically married couples who would go back to the beginning after seven years.

LADY SWETE. You're not in love with Mrs. Lovely?

SIR ADOLPHUS. I won't say that. But she hasn't kissed me so far.

LADY SWETE (*half laughing*). Dollie, you're a tease!

SIR ADOLPHUS. Well, I'm not the only one. You may be Venus, Rachel, but I can't remember any woman ever treating me as if I were Adonis.

LADY SWETE. Supposing I were to try?

SIR ADOLPHUS. You wouldn't succeed; and failure would be painful.

LADY SWETE. What would you like me to do, then?

SIR ADOLPHUS. Jog along with me as best you can in your own way, Rachel.

LADY SWETE. But sometimes I think I don't make you happy.

SIR ADOLPHUS. That's only when I see you unhappy. Take the white with the black, my dear, there are few people better off than we.

LADY SWETE (*impulsively*). I wish I were your age, Dollie.

SIR ADOLPHUS (*with the light-hearted laughter of a philosopher*). My own appeal's down for hearing long before that, Rachel.

LADY SWETE (*almost tearfully*). O, don't say that
SIR ADOLPHUS (*touched*). Why, my dear, you'd think I was threatening you. (*Takes her in somewhat fatherly fashion in his arms, then listens*). I believe there's someone coming. If the Colonel saw us there'd be a shocking scandal. Come back to the house.

LADY SWETE (*roguishly*). You'll read me Coventry Patmore ?

SIR ADOLPHUS (*protesting*). O, no ; not if it bores you—really, not if it bores you.

As they go off towards the house, enter, from the other direction, LORD WADEBRIDGE and MRS. LOVELY.

MRS. LOVELY. I wish you'd let me tell you the whole story.

WADEBRIDGE. No man and woman who love each other as I believe we love can ever tell each other the whole story.

MRS. LOVELY (*with gentle firmness*). I can tell you all about myself, Wadey.

WADEBRIDGE. I don't question it. But if you do that you compel me, in justice, to do the same, and I assure you if I did you could never think of me without laughing.

MRS. LOVELY. What I have to tell you is not amusing but pitiful.

WADEBRIDGE. Then why make us both miserable by raking it up ?

MRS. LOVELY. Don't you think it's my duty ?

WADEBRIDGE. Why should I think it your duty ?

MRS. LOVELY. I thought men did . . .

WADEBRIDGE (*tenderly*). You wish me to believe that you love me ?

MRS. LOVELY. If the word has any meaning.

WADEBRIDGE. You are willing to be my wife ?

MRS. LOVELY. Even if you turned from me, I should always long for you now, Wadey.

WADEBRIDGE. If I believe that you love me, I must believe that you would not marry me, knowing of any reason why you should not.

MRS. LOVELY (*mechanically plucking at his button-hole*). No, Wadey.

WADEBRIDGE (*quietly looking down at her*). Well, do you know of such a reason ?

MRS. LOVELY (*lifting her head until her eyes meet his*). No, Wadey. Upon my honour.

WADEBRIDGE. Then why should we call up the ghosts of dead fancies to gibe and mock at our honest love ? The world we knew before we met is not the world we know now ; the life we lived as separate beings is not the life we shall live together.

MRS. LOVELY. Dear one, I never lived before I met you. All the world I know you made for me. I'm not young in years, Wadey, but I come to you as a little child. (*Suddenly shrinking.*) Have you thought over what I told you yesterday ?

WADEBRIDGE. Darling, if it's our fate that no little feet shall carry into our lives the only happiness that we cannot give one another, at least we shall have the second greatest joy of making a smoother way for all the children that ever may walk the earth.

MRS. LOVELY. Yes, yes ; and, most of all, the

children that no one wants shall be our children,
Wadey. *Enter LORD PADSTOW.*

PADSTOW. Emily, go to Agatha ; she's coming down from the house and wants to talk to you. There, kiss me before you go. (*Looking after her.*) Well, well. Yesterday, to-day, to-morrow, they're all one really.

WADEBRIDGE. Dad, you look tired.

Places chair for him.

PADSTOW (*lightly*). Tired ! dear no.

WADEBRIDGE (*gently forcing him to sit*). But you do, all the same, you know. You don't take proper care of yourself.

PADSTOW. Think of nothing else, unfortunately.

WADEBRIDGE. Have you that pain to-day ?

PADSTOW. Pain—what's pain, Wadey ? A joke, except perhaps at night when you want a bit of rest.

WADEBRIDGE. You certainly don't let it prey upon your mind.

PADSTOW. Nothing ever preyed upon my mind except your mother's death. But this about Austin to-day hits an old fellow like me hard.

WADEBRIDGE (*remorsefully*). I did wrong to tell you.

PADSTOW (*shaking his head*). I can't remember you ever did wrong. Indeed, I used to think you a bit of a prig. I apologise, Wadey.

WADEBRIDGE (*huskily*). Don't, Dad ; you were quite right.

PADSTOW. Well, it's no use crying over mistakes—mine or Austin's—any more than whimpering like a

cur because I've got to suffer at seventy from what I might have escaped by dying at fifty.

WADEBRIDGE (*almost unbearably moved*). You are suffering, Dad.

PADSTOW. Not more than I can grin and bear, my boy, when I know I'm going to see you happily married.

WADEBRIDGE. You do like Emily, don't you ?

PADSTOW. I'll tell you how she affects me, Wadey. It's odd ; I've been thinking it out. Sometimes I see you as man and wife, and sometimes I see her as, as—well, in fact, as your mother, Wadey. It seems to me that you dwindle away, right down into a tiny lad again. And then I want to laugh and cry. . . . And the plain fact of the matter is I'm doting, Wadey.

WADEBRIDGE. Then I hope I'll soon be doting.

PADSTOW. Well, of course, if I live a little longer, a year, two years—I'm afraid that's the longest—I may see a real little Wadey where now I see only . . . memory.

WADEBRIDGE (*imploringly*). Dad, . . . we mustn't count on that.

PADSTOW (*his face falling*). Oh ! . . . ah ! (*Jumps up and turns his back a moment, while LORD WADEBRIDGE watches him painfully. Then at last he looks round and takes LORD WADEBRIDGE'S hand.*) I'm not taking things as I should to-day. We can retire honourably into obscurity, Wadey, if you're the rearguard.

Enter the COLONEL and MR. FIDLER.

COLONEL (*pleased with himself*). Well, Lord Pad-

stow, if you come out with the guns to-morrow I hope you'll see me do myself justice.

PADSTOW (*quite as a matter of course*). Going to blow out your brains, are you ?

Turns his back on him.

COLONEL (*puzzled, to MR. FIDLER*). I don't think I quite caught that observation.

MR. FIDLER. He said you ought to blow out your brains.

COLONEL. I suppose he saw me kissing Lady Swete.

MR. FIDLER (*with open scorn*). Go on, now. Chorus girls are all very well; but you won't get me to believe that.

COLONEL. What ! you won't believe me when I say . . .

MR. FIDLER. A bit too thick, that's what it is.

Enter LADY FISHERTON and the VICAR, followed by LORD FISHERTON and MRS. LOVELY.

LADY FISHERTON (*to LORD WADEBRIDGE*). Do you know where Austin is ?

MR. FIDLER (*as LORD WADEBRIDGE does not answer*). I saw him go down the avenue a while ago—so did the Colonel and the Vicar.

LADY FISHERTON. Yes, the Vicar told us, but . . .

MR. FIDLER (*cautiously to LORD WADEBRIDGE*). I think the lodgekeeper said something about his turning towards the station.

COLONEL (*viciously*). I hope you won't find him on the line.

FISHERTON (*startled*). On the line !

Enter SIR ADOLPHUS and LADY SWETE.

THE VICAR (*gravely choosing his words*). That would be a most deplorable accident.

SIR ADOLPHUS (*troubled*). Has there been an accident ?

PADSTOW (*drily*). Only an apple-cart upset.

LADY SWETE (*mischievously to MR. FIDLER*). Now whose can that be ?

MR. FIDLER. Ask the Colonel that.

COLONEL. No use asking me if . . .

FISHERTON. But where is Austin ?

PADSTOW (*to LORD WADEBRIDGE*). Tell 'em.

WADEBRIDGE. My brother is gone to London to beg the Archbishop of Canterbury to head a petition for the abolition of capital punishment.

FISHERTON. What, Austin ? Here's a how d'ye do !

MR. FIDLER. He, of all men ! And after what he said to-day ! . . .

WADEBRIDGE. He, of all men, says to-day that there's not a man upon earth that wouldn't hang if you gave him rope enough.

COLONEL. He evidently has a bad conscience.

WADEBRIDGE. Better a bad one than none at all.

COLONEL. Personalities are in extremely bad taste.

MR. FIDLER. D'ye suppose the Archbishop will listen to him—or any bishop, for the matter of that ?

WADEBRIDGE. I prefer not to offer an opinion. In any case, there will be no one hanged in England while the present Government lasts.

COLONEL. Imbecility !

MR. FIDLER. The Prime Minister will have something to say to that.

WADEBRIDGE. He has said all that is necessary. It was on that condition that I accepted office.

COLONEL. Well, I prophesied only yesterday that you'd wreck this Ministry in six months.

WADEBRIDGE. Perhaps we may not last so long. And when we are gone the Liberals may do what they dare.

COLONEL. O, the next Government will be one of women.

WADEBRIDGE (*with something of his father's irony*). Perhaps to catch your vote, Colonel Gower, and yours, Mr. Fidler, they'll go on hanging.

MR. FIDLER (*to SIR ADOLPHUS*). But you can't approve of this?

SIR ADOLPHUS. I approve of nothing. I have to administer the law as it exists. If you ask me how I come by my daily bread, I purchase it with what is partly blood money.

COLONEL (*contemptuously*). You might as well say that my profession . . .

SIR ADOLPHUS (*with perfect politeness*). I am confident the only one open to you.

MR. FIDLER (*with marked approval*). There, there. That's fair. We all have our limitations. (*To PADSTOW.*) But you, my lord?

PADSTOW. O, I'm old-fashioned. I should hang everyone, beginning with the County Bench.

THE VICAR. I have always thought capital punishment a hideous thing (*piteously*); but what are we to do with the morally unfit?

WADEBRIDGE. We must treat the morally unfit as we treat the physically unfit.

THE VICAR. Ah, yes; but I mean those past saving—the unrepentant.

WADEBRIDGE. Yes, the morally incurable; we must treat them as we treat the physically incurable.

PADSTOW (*gravely and deferentially*). Can the treatment be the same?

WADEBRIDGE (*equally deferentially*). No, but the spirit in which we apply it can be the same.

COLONEL. The things are utterly different.

WADEBRIDGE. How?

COLONEL. The physically unfit are not a danger to others.

WADEBRIDGE. Dare you say that?

COLONEL. At some other time I could prove to you . . .

WADEBRIDGE. I can prove to you now that one little innocent child may be a greater danger to the community than the most approved scoundrel in the Newgate Calendar.

COLONEL. You may prove what you like, but . . .

WADEBRIDGE. Perhaps it would please you to see that child hanged.

COLONEL. We know that the Romans . . .

WADEBRIDGE. Threw children to the lions for sport.

COLONEL. All very well. . . . But what will you do with your murderers?

WADEBRIDGE. The details of the Bill cannot be discussed here.

COLONEL. And never can be.

WADEBRIDGE. But this I say : we shall not continue a procedure more barbarous than the evil which it professes to remedy.

COLONEL (*exploding*). I said yesterday you ought to be shot, and I repeat it now to your face.

WADEBRIDGE (*outstaring him*). And I answer you to your face that if as I stand here you murder me . . .

COLONEL (*thunderstruck*). I murder !

WADEBRIDGE. And I believe you to be capable of any act to gratify your malice. . . .

COLONEL. I . . . Malice !

WADEBRIDGE. I promise you that you will not be hanged for it.

COLONEL. I hanged !

WADEBRIDGE. You can imagine for yourself what would be His Majesty's pleasure.

Turns upon his heel to address himself to MRS. LOVELY.

Enter SIMS, who approaches the COLONEL.

COLONEL (*recovering himself now that LORD WADEBRIDGE'S eyes are no longer looking into his*). You suggest that I am a fit person for Broadmoor ! (*As WADEBRIDGE takes no notice.*) Clearly, Lady Fisherton, Lord Wadebridge and I cannot both remain in your house.

SIMS (*in his most subtly diplomatic manner to the COLONEL*). If you please, Sir, at what time shall I serve your luncheon, Sir ?

COLONEL (*enraged at the interruption*). My luncheon ?

SIMS. If you please, Sir, her ladyship said you would be wanting to catch the 2.20.

While SIMS is speaking to the COLONEL the whole company, with the exception of MR. FIDLER, who is listening to SIMS, turn their backs and move slowly away from him.

COLONEL (*in a loud voice to MR. FIDLER*). So government by women has begun already.

MR. FIDLER (*hastily, as he realises he may be suspected of sympathy with the COLONEL*). O, ay! Anyhow, I shouldn't miss the 2.20, if I were you.

Turns his back and hurries after the others. In the distance is heard the deep, solemn note of an aeroplane, which grows in power until the end.

COLONEL. Luncheon 1.15. Tell my man I want him.

Exit, followed by SIMS.

SIR ADOLPHUS. What is that curious noise?

MAY dances in, her eyes aglow.

MAY. He's coming, he's coming. Isn't he perfectly splendid?

LADY FISHERTON. Who?

MAY. Tom Smith.

THE VICAR. Where?

MAY (*pointing into the sky*). Up there!

THE VICAR (*as all strain their eyes to heaven*). And they say the age of miracles is passed.

PADSTOW. I hope Wadey's miracle will pass.

MAY (*buttonholing her mother*). You've got to let me marry him now. The Marquess said so.

PADSTOW. All I said was that if you were my daughter I'd let you marry him.

MAY. O, well, what's good 'enough for your daughter's good enough for us—we're nobodies.

WADEBRIDGE (*to* LADY SWETE). After all, I think there will be two persons perfectly happy to-day.

LADY SWETE (*with gentle irony*). Mr. and Mrs. Smith.

MRS. LOVELY. Hope and Charity.

WADEBRIDGE. The father and mother of to-morrow.

CURTAIN

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